

Basic Points About Vedic Culture / Hinduism: A Short Introduction Part 2

Information Assembled From Various Sources
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This is designed to give succinct and easy answers to common questions about the Vedic tradition and its customs. It can also be considered a continuation and a deeper level to the ebook I wrote called, *A Vedic Culture / Hinduism: A Short Introduction*,[©] also found on my website at: www.stephen-knapp.com. This is to help show that everything in the Vedic tradition has a purpose and a logical explanation, if we only know what it is and can, thus, explain it to others so they also can understand it. More elaborate answers to the philosophical questions and explanations of the Vedic spiritual knowledge can be found in my books.

Presently many Indians have let themselves be swept away from their roots by the storm of cultural exchange coming from the West. Many have also lost faith in their own values. They feel ashamed in wearing the *sutra* or sacred thread, or following basic Vedic traditions. But that is mostly because they have lost the reasons behind the purpose of them. It is now time to again regain the awareness and the reasoning of the customs of this great and profound culture. How can we explain the meaning and purpose behind these symbols and traditions when we ourselves don't know them? It is time to again awaken to the reasons for the customs that have been followed for thousands of years, and this booklet is such an attempt to do that.

This booklet presents points regarding “Basics of the Philosophy,” “Appearances and Customs,” “Points About Dharma,” “Facts on Symbols and Traditions,” “Points About Vedic Worship,” “Other Points of Interest,” and “Taking Care of the Deceased.”

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BASICS OF VEDIC PHILOSOPHY

WHAT IS MEANT BY SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is the relentless pursuit of the highest Truth and one's real spiritual identity beyond the physical body and as part of the Supreme Spirit. It is the process of attaining direct spiritual realization, which far surpasses blind faith, and is based on attaining one's own experience of self-realization. It is beyond conventional forms of religion that often keep one bound to a dogma or set of beliefs, when direct perception and experience of spiritual Truth will take one to seeing the spiritual realities that are described in the Vedic texts.

WHAT IS SELF-REALIZATION

Self-realization is directly perceiving one's real identity as the higher Self within the body, higher than the mind or intellect, but beyond all material components or influences. It is the stage of enlightenment and seeing what and who you really are. The true Self is not limited to material conditions. Its nature is eternal, blissful consciousness. When one truly recognizes that one's own Self is the same as the soul in all beings, one becomes an embodiment of peace, love, and compassion capable of uplifting the world.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL CULTURE

Culture is the development of the beliefs, skills, arts, crafts, etc., of a people. Spiritual culture is the manifestation of the divine, pure nature of human beings, by the society or the country as a result of practice and expression over a long period of time. It is expressed through music, dance, writings and places of worship. Any other form that doesn't rest its base on the divine nature of all beings cannot be the contributor to the integrated spiritual culture. The Vedic system is for doing exactly this.

ALL RELIGIONS ARE NOT THE SAME

Some people ask, "Aren't all religions the same?" No. Every religion is different. Many preachers, mainly Hindu preachers who have vested interest of building their empires propagate the idea that all religions are the same. So any religions will give the same result. But this is not the fact.

Hindus respect other religions. It is not difficult for them to see various levels of spiritual truth in other spiritual paths. But all religions take their practitioners to different levels of philosophical understanding, spiritual knowledge, levels of consciousness, and different abilities to perceive spiritual Truth. So all religions are not the same. This is why members of some religions are more congenial and respectful toward members of other religions, while some members of particular religions are not respectful toward those that are different, are quick to call them infidels and other derogatory names, and say that they are going to hell, or tell them that they need to convert in order to be "saved". This is certainly due to a different perspective and a lack of understanding that we all worship the same Supreme Being, though in different ways or expressions. Thus, religions can be compared to the difference between an abridged dictionary and one that is unabridged. They both contain the same knowledge, but one is more complete than the other. If you are going to have a dictionary, you might want to get the best one available, and that would be the unabridged dictionary, or the one that is most complete in its knowledge. And that is like the Vedic spiritual texts, which compile a library of texts for those who want to understand the intricacies of spiritual knowledge.

WHO IS GOD

In the Sanskrit language the word for God is *Bhagavan*. *Bhag* implies six attributes: *Absolute Fame, Absolute Dharma, Absolute Wealth, Absolute Knowledge, Absolute Beauty and Absolute Detachment*. One possessing these attributes is *Bhagavan*, the Supreme Person or God.

In simple words, One personified as perfect - par excellence is God. One who is Virtue-Incarnate is God. The One who has lived to the infinite limits of right conduct is God. An example of such a person in Hindu history is Maryada Purshottama Shree Rama or Sri Krishna.

A person who had shown such qualities of par-excellence and can guide the rest of society to follow the right conduct in living is known as the Incarnation of God, or an *avatara*, God who descends into this material realm.

HOW A FORMLESS GOD CAN BE RECONCILED WITH A PERSONAL GOD

Some saints and sages have emphasized the worship of and meditation upon a formless God, the Infinite and the Absolute. In contrast, there are people who worship God in different forms to which they impart particular attributes and qualities based on their intellectual capacity, personal tastes and preferences. However, the great sages have explained that one must understand the three main aspects of God, namely His personal or Bhagavan aspect; His localized Paramatma aspect or Supersoul expansion in the hearts of all beings; and His impersonal force or Brahman aspect. Until a person understands all three features, his understanding of God remains incomplete. It can be said that either form of worship can lead to *Moksha* (liberation) if steadily practiced with a true and sincere heart. But in *Bhagavad-gita*, Lord Krishna specifically says that meditation on His formless aspect is indeed a difficult path. [My article, “God is Both Personal and Impersonal” on my website goes much deeper in this matter.]

THERE ARE NOT MANY GODS

Sometimes people raise a point of confusion that they have regarding the Vedic culture. They think there are too many gods. They ask why there are so many gods, and which one should a person choose to worship? First of all, there is only one God. His virtues are manifested in different ways, such as Bhagavan, Paramatma, and Brahman. Without comprehending all three aspects of the Supreme, a person will not have a full understanding of God.

If we properly analyze the situation, we will understand that there is but one Supreme Being who has many agents or demigods who assist in managing the creation and the natural forces within. And, like anyone else, if they are properly approached with prayer or worship, they may help facilitate the person by granting certain wishes that may be within the jurisdiction of that demigod.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, chapter 3, Yagyavalkya has said that in reality there are only 33 gods and goddesses. Of these 8 are Vasus, 11 Rudras, 12 Adityas, and Indra and Prajapati. The 8 Vasus include fire, earth, air, sky (space), sun, Dyau, moon and the planets. Entire mankind depends upon these. The five *gyanindriya* (the five senses of perception, namely the eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin), the five *karmindriya* (the five organs of action, namely hands, feet, larynx, organs of reproduction and the anus) and the soul comprise the 11 Rudras. The 12 months of the year are referred to as the 12 Adityas. The clouds are Devraj Indra, and nature, or the will of the Supreme Being, is referred to as Prajapati. Then there are also other positions that are considered major or minor *devas*. According to the *Vedas*, the *devas* are not imaginary or mythological beings, but are agents of the Supreme Will to administer different aspects of the universal affairs. They also represent and control various powers of nature. Thus, they manifest in the physical, subtle or psychic levels of our existence both from within and without. In this way, a transcendentalist sees that behind every aspect of nature is a personality.

The whole universe depends principally upon six divine forces - fire, earth, air, sky, Aditya and Dyau. When the religious texts have said that there are only 33 gods and goddesses, or forces that govern this universe, the words 33 *koti* as used in the original text have been misinterpreted to mean 33 crores (330 million) gods and goddesses, instead of 33 categories of

divine forces.

The *Rig-Veda* (1/164/46) explains: An embodiment of truth, knowledgeable persons know the Supreme Being in different forms and different names. The Supreme Being is known by names like Agni, Yama, Matrishva, Indra, Varun, Divya, Suparn, Gurutman and many more. The religious texts are full of such narratives. Yet, the truth is that there is only one God. We see Him in different forms and with different names.

The names of these gods are considered offices or positions, rather than the actual name of the demigod. For example, we may call the president of the country by his personal name, or simply Mr. President. It's the position itself that allows for him to have certain powers or areas of influence. In the case of the *devas*, it is only after accumulating much pious credit that a living being can earn the position of being a particular demigod. Then a person may become an Indra, or Vayu, or attain some other position to assume specific powers, or to control various aspects of material energy.

Another example is that when you walk into a big factory, you see so many workers and all that they are doing. You may initially think that these workers are the reason for whatever goes on in the factory. However, more important than the workers are the foremen, the managers, and then the executives. Amongst these you will find people of varying degrees of authority. Someone will be in charge of designing the products. Another may be the Chief Financial Officer or main accountant. Another may be in charge of personnel, while someone else may be in charge of maintenance in the factory itself. Finally, a chief executive officer or president of the company is the most important of all. Without him there may not even be a company. You may not see the president right away, but his influence is everywhere since all the workers are engaging in projects according to his decisions. The managers and foremen act as his authorized agents to keep things moving accordingly. The numerous demigods act in the same way concerning the functions of nature, all of whom represent some aspect or power of the Supreme Will. That's why it is sometimes said there are 33 million different gods in Hinduism. Actually, there may be many forms, *avatars*, or aspects of God, but there is only one God, or one Absolute Truth.

This is often a confusing issue to people new to Vedic philosophy. We often hear the question among Westerners that if Hinduism has so many gods, how do you know which ones to worship? The point is that the *devas* affect all levels of universal activities, including the weather, or who is bestowed with particular opulences such as riches, beautiful wife or husband, large family, good health, etc. For example, one could worship Agni for getting power, Durgadevi for good fortune, Indra for good sex life or plenty of rain, or the Vasus for getting money. Such instruction is in the *karma-kanda* section of the *Vedas* which many people considered to be the most important part of Vedic knowledge. This is for helping people acquire the facilities for living a basic material existence.

The reciprocation between the demigods and society is explained in *Bhagavad-gita* (3.10-12). It is stated that in the beginning the Lord of all beings created men and demigods along with the sacrifices to Lord Vishnu that were to be performed. The Lord blessed them saying that these sacrifices will enable men to prosper and attain all desirable things. By these sacrificial duties the demigods will be pleased and the demigods will also please you with all the necessities of life, and prosperity will spread to all. But he who enjoys what is given by the demigods without offering them in return is a thief.

In this way, it was recommended that people could perform sacrificial rituals to obtain their desires. However, by the performance of such acts they should understand their dependent position, not only on the demigods, but ultimately on the Supreme Being. As further explained in *Bhagavad-*

gita (3.14-15), all living beings exist on food grains, which are produced from rain, which is produced by the performance of prescribed sacrifices or duties. These prescribed duties are described in the Vedic literature, which is manifest from the Supreme Being. Therefore, the Supreme is eternally established in acts of sacrifice.

Although the demigods may accept worship from the human beings and bless them with particular benedictions according to the sacrifices that are performed, they are still not on the level of the Supreme Lord Vishnu (who is an incarnation of Lord Krishna). The *Rig-veda* (1.22.20) explains: “The demigods are always looking to that supreme abode of Vishnu.” *Bhagavad-gita* (17.23) also points out: “From the beginning of creation, the three syllables *om tat sat* have been used to indicate the Supreme Absolute Truth (Brahman). They were uttered by brahmanas while chanting the Vedic hymns and during sacrifices, for the satisfaction of the Supreme.” In this way, by uttering *om tat sat*, which is stressed in Vedic texts, the performers of the rituals for worshiping the demigods were also offering obeisances to Lord Vishnu for its success. The four *Vedas* mainly deal with material elevation and since Lord Vishnu is the Lord of material liberation, most sacrifices were directed toward the demigods.

In *Bhagavad-gita*, however, Lord Krishna points out that men of small knowledge, who are given to worldly desires, take delight in the flowery words of the *Vedas* that prescribe rituals for attaining power, riches, or rebirth in heaven. With their goal of enjoyment they say there is nothing else than this. However, Krishna goes on to explain (in *Bhagavad-gita* 7.21-23) that when a person desires to worship a particular demigod for the temporary and limited fruits he or she may bestow, Krishna, as the Supersoul in everyone’s heart, makes that person’s faith in that demigod steady. But all the benefits given by any demigod actually are given by Krishna alone, for without whom no one has any power. The worshipers of the demigods go to the planets of the demigods, but worshipers of Krishna reach Krishna’s spiritual abode.

Thus, as one progresses in understanding, it is expected that they will gradually give up the pursuit for temporary material pleasures and then begin to endeavor for reaching the supreme goal of Vedic knowledge. For one who is situated in such knowledge and is self-realized, the prescribed duties in the *Vedas* for worshiping the demigods are unnecessary. As *Bhagavad-gita* (3.17-18) explains, for one who is fully self-realized, who is fully satiated in the self, delights only in the self, there is no duty or need to perform the prescribed duties found in the *Vedas*, because he has no purpose or material desires to fulfill.

However, another view of the Vedic gods is that they represent different aspects of understanding ourselves, especially through the path of yoga and meditation. For example, the god of wind is Vayu, and is related to the practice of yoga as the breath and its control in *pranayama*. Agni is the god of fire and relates to the fire of consciousness or awareness. Soma relates to the bliss in the *samadhi* of yoga practice. Many of the Vedic gods also represent particular powers of yoga and are related to the different *chakras* in the subtle body. It is accepted that as a person raises his or her consciousness through the *chakras*, he or she will attain the level of awareness and the power and assistance that is associated with the particular divine personality related to that *chakra*.

THERE ARE NOT MANY GODS

A true and purified devotee of God can see God everywhere. Everything is but a manifestation of God’s energy. And to such a devotee, God can reveal Himself in so many ways. God presents Himself in the personal form in which one wishes to see Him. There have been many devotees who have realized and conversed directly with God. The relationship between God and His

devotee is considered most special and private. It is not appropriate etiquette for a devotee to advertise his or her relationship or ecstasies that are attained with one's relationship or communication with the Supreme. In the past, many saints have realized God and found perfect peace within. But this realization is dependent on one's sincerity and devotion, by which God becomes willing to reveal Himself to the devotee. Otherwise, such revelation is not possible. One cannot force God to appear no more than one can force the sun to show itself appear in the middle of the night.

WHAT IS PRAYER

Prayer is an act of love for God, usually expressed in the form of remembrance of the Supreme Being, Almighty, and Absolute Self, explicitly or implicitly. It is a momentary or prolonged withdrawal from the self-centered world, in the shelter and protection of God, submitting and submerging the self (ego) to Him completely. Prayer can take place involuntarily or by design. It can be invoked silently or vocally, by reciting self-made words or prescribed text, in solitude or in communion with others, including accompaniment of music.

Recitation of scriptural verses or popular songs as a prayer is quite common, particularly in the Hindu tradition. Such recitation is helpful in creating a devotional atmosphere, and beneficial for those who to increase their meditation on the Absolute Being. The positive quality of sound in disciplining the mind, especially in a group situation, such as in Bhajans and Kirtanas, is well recognized.

The question whether the devotee should or should not ask anything from God is best left to the devotee and his or her relationship with God. As children of God, we may be tempted to ask for certain boons from the Father. But as we mature spiritually (analogous to a child growing up), our expectations, hopefully, dwindle and we visit God's house and memory for the memory-sake and devotion alone. At that time, our faith and submission of the self are adequate for supporting and sustaining us; there is little need to ask for anything else.

WHAT IS A MANTRA

A mantra is a sacred verbal formula repeated in prayer or meditation. The chanting of mantras helps to open the heart and mind to clear consciousness, which is the reality of our true identity as a spiritual being. Mantras also create an uplifting and meditative atmosphere for inner communion and one-pointedness of our concentration. There are numerous Sanskrit mantras for a variety of purposes. Many mantras are often used as a form of greeting as well. Numerous mantras and stotras are found on this website (www.stephen-knapp.com/a_little_book_of_prayers_mantras_gayatri.htm). Some mantras include the following:

The Hare Krishna Maha-Mantra, or great mantra for deliverance. This is: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare / Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

Aum (or OM): According to the Vedas, the ancient scriptures of India, OM is a symbol for the Absolute Reality, and is a name of God. It is also the first Sanskrit letter and the first word in many Sanskrit mantras. This is also used as a greeting in such form as AHari Om@, meaning salutations to the Divine as Hari, the Supreme who gives auspiciousness and removes obstacles. Another greeting is AHari bol@, which means chant the names of Hari, God.

Om Namah Shivaya: This means ASalutations to the Absolute in the form of Shiva@.

Aum Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu: AMay all beings everywhere be happy@.
Om Amriteswaryai Namah: AI bow to that Supreme Energy and Immortal Bliss@.

WHAT ARE BHAJANS AND KIRTANS

In Bhakti-Marga (the path of Devotion), a number of rituals are adopted by the devotee to remember and worship God or the deity (personal god) of choice. An important ritual or medium of worship is to offer prayer in the form of devotional songs describing godly attributes, singing praise, and invoke the deity's grace and benediction. Such devotional songs are called Bhajans. Often Bhajans are sung collectively and with accompaniment of music, with repetitive rendering of lines.

Vocal repetition of Mantras is helpful towards mental concentration and Bhajanas can be regarded to have a similar effect. A variation of Bhajan is called Kirtan, where just one or two lines are repeated indefinitely over a period of time. Bhajan-Kirtan can be heard in temples and homes in the course of doing *puja* (worship) of deities. Often these Bhajans are popular songs and poems composed by celebrated saints and devotees, such as Tulsidasa, Suradasa, Meerabai, Tukarama, and Kabira.

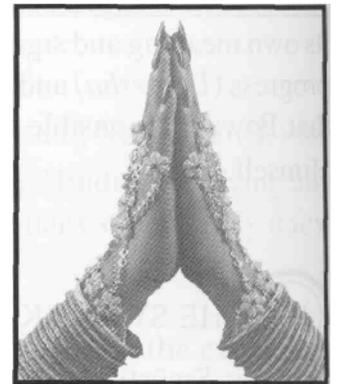
WHAT IS PRASADA

This is a Sanskrit term meaning AGod=s mercy.@ This is often in reference to sacred food after it has been offered to the Deity in the temple, or when food is handed out by the pure or great saintly devotee or holy person. Such sacred food, which is considered to become spiritually surcharged, is honored by carefully accepting it when received.

APPEARANCES AND CUSTOMS

MEANING OF THE GREETINGS NAMASKARA (NAMASTE)

The traditional Vedic/Hindu greeting is '*Namaskara*' or '*Namaste*', which is said along with joining the two palms in front and bowing the head. This greeting acknowledges the presence of divinity in all human beings. The person saying *Namaskaara* implies, “with all my physical strength (represented by both folded hands) and my intellect (represented by bowed head), I pay respect to the *Atma* (soul) within you”.



TILAK, BINDEE, AND SINDOORA (SINDHU)

In Vedic tradition, *Tilak* is a mark of red powder or sandalwood paste that is applied on the forehead of a person mostly before prayers. In the Vaishnava tradition, the sandalwood paste or gopichand clay is applied over the forehead showing a “V” mark extending from the bridge of the nose to the hairline. This represents the name of Vishnu and that the body is a temple, the original temple of God. In some cases there are three vertical lines, a center line within the “V”. This is often done by devotees of Lord Rama. When three vertical lines are shown, this can represent the tripurti (threesome) nature of God, namely, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha, which represents creation, preservation and destruction,

respectively.

In the Shiva tradition, the lines marked with ash in a horizontal way. The forehead is considered a seat of memory and the 'spiritual eye or the third eye'. The applying of *tilak* thus symbolizes the retention of the memory of God.

This *tilak* also has other functions: It is a mark of respect to the higher centers in the brain where thoughts are generated and it has a psychological effect of keeping away evil thoughts. Sandalwood is used as it has cooling properties and a very pleasant aroma. This signifies that one's head should remain calm and should generate pleasant thoughts. *Tilak* is also the reminder of vows. The most popular is the red teeka (*Bindee*) and Sindoor worn by married Hindu women to symbolize their marriage and the wedding vows. The Sindoor (vermillion) is applied on the married woman's head where hair is parted, making a red line from the forehead going back. This also symbolizes that the woman is happily married. *Tilak* is also applied at the forehead for good luck or good wishes at occasions like loved ones going away from home for extended period of time.

According to Hindu religious texts, applying *tilak* or *tika* is necessary at all religious ceremonies, without which no Hindu ceremony is complete. From birth till death *tilak* is a part of life. All gods, goddesses, yogis, saints, sages and mahatmas apply *tilak* on their forehead. Some householders also apply *tilak* daily, although generally it is customary to apply *tilak* at the beginning of the religious ceremony.

According to tradition, applying *tilak* is a symbol of honor being extended to the person. Guests are welcomed or seen off with *tilak*. Even when householders leave on long travel or pilgrimage, they are seen off with a *tilak* and good wishes.

In the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* (Brahma Parva, 26) it is said: If *tilak* is not adorned on the forehead at the time of a holy bath, *yajna*, prayer or religious ceremony, the effort bears no fruit. The Brahmin priest must have a *tilak* when performing prayers, *tarpan* and other ceremonies.

The *Skanda Purana* also explains with what fingers *tilak* must be applied for best results: When *tilak* is applied with the ring finger it brings peace, with the middle finger it prolongs age, with the thumb it promotes health, and with the forefinger one attains salvation.

Devotees of Vishnu use a *tilak* of two thin upward lines, devotees of Shakti (Shakti and Shiva) use two dots, and devotees of Shiva use three horizontal lines. Some religious texts suggest that those using a *tilak* of three horizontal lines during *shraddha*, *yajna* ceremonies, meditation, or prayers overcome death.

The *tilak*, *tika* or *bindiya* (for women) is applied in the centre of the forehead because the entire body is controlled from this point. Maharishi Yagyavalka said that this position is appropriate because Shiva's third eye is located here. After the application of *tilak* pure thoughts are said to emerge.

APPROPRIATE DRESS IN TEMPLES

One should always wear conservative clothes that keep the body comfortable but covered as well. In the West, clothes styles are often quite free and relaxed, but if it is too revealing it can be taken as disrespectful or even offensive to the deities or even the people who are there. So one should always try to dress in a most suitable and modest manner.

WHAT IS A SARI

A sari is the style of outfit that is worn by many women from India. It can be a beautiful and colorful cloth that wraps around and covers the body completely. But it can be most beautiful as well. It may take a person a little practice putting it on after being shown how to wear one.

WHAT IS A DHOTI

This is for men, which is a single piece of cloth that is wrapped around the legs, tied and pleated at the waist that becomes a loose and comfortable piece of apparel, especially for the hot climate of South Asia. It is a traditional type of clothing that is still regularly worn in India.

WHY MANY DEVOTEES WEAR WHITE

In some yoga groups or ashramas many people wear white clothes. This is because it is a symbol for cleanliness, purity and peace. It is not a color that will agitate the mind. It is also a simple reminder of one's spiritual goal.

WHY MANY SWAMIS WEAR SAFFRON COLORED CLOTH

Saffron is often worn by those who have become spiritually advanced and materially renounced. Saffron is the sign of renunciation from many of the common comforts of the world. It represents a determined focus on one's spiritual goal of life. The color also gives peace and tranquility to the mind, which helps one on their spiritual journey and development.

The flags on Hindu temples, as well as the robes worn by our religious preachers, mostly *Swamis* and *Sannyasis* (religious and spiritually advanced individuals), are of saffron (orange) color. The persons wearing the saffron robes are those who have renounced married life. The color denotes the sun's light giving glow. The sun has a very prominent place in the Vedic literature as the source of energy that sustains life on earth. It acts as a reminder of the power of God, the act of selfless service and renunciation.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHIKHA (TUFT OF HAIR)

Why do we see some priests and monks have a shaved head with a tuft of hair in the back? First of all, this tuft of hair is called a *shikha*. When long enough, it is tied in a knot at the crown-point (right above the suture) on the central top of the head. This point is given distinctive importance in the science of yoga and spirituality as the point of contact with the brain-centre of intellectual and emotional sensitivity. It also indicates the body as a temple.

The *Shikha* symbolizes the presence of discerning intellect, farsightedness, and the deity of knowledge upon our head. It is a flag of human culture. It reminds us of the religious principles of morality, righteousness, responsibility, and dutiful awareness.

This body is the fort of the individual self upon which the flag of the *shikha* is hoisted as the mark of the dignified values and virtues of humanity. The foreign invaders, the crusaders against the Vedic (Indian) culture had attempted to eliminate the roots of this divine culture by first cutting the *shikha* and removing the *sutra* (sacred thread) from the bodies of the followers of the Vedic religion. Thousands of innocent heads were cut off just for protesting against this attack. It was for protecting the glory of these universal emblems of human religion that Maharana Pratap, Vir Shivaji, Guru Govind Singh, and other great martyrs of India had dedicated their noble lives. Today, we have forgotten their sacrifices and done what even the foreign invaders of the medieval times could not do.

The commencement of wearing of the *sutra* and tightening of the *sikha* at the time of initiation (*diksha*) into Gayatri *sadhana* is referred in the *shastras* as *dwijatva* - the second birth, and the one who wears the sacred thread (*sutra*) and keeps the *shikha* is called a *dwija*, or twice-born as a brahmana. That means that regardless of whatever family line one has been born into, he has now attained his second birth as a brahmana.

The *shikha* also represents the *sirsa* (top) of the Gayatri Mantra. It reminds the devotee of the subtle presence of the pure divine intelligence in the human mind. Tightening the hair knot right above the suture induces marvelous psychological benefits. It helps in harmonious blood circulation in the brain in normal conditions and augments alertness. As described in the yoga-s scriptures, it also lends support in increasing mental concentration and meditation. In terms of its sublime spiritual effects, the *shikha* works like an antenna in the outer domain of the *sahasrara chakra* (topmost extrasensory centre) to link the individual consciousness with the cosmic consciousness in the elevated state of Gayatri *sadhana*.

THE MEANING OF THE SUTRA OR SACRED THREAD

The *sutra* is the name for the sacred thread, also called *yagyopavit*, which is worn on the shoulder, usually hanging over the left shoulder and down across the chest around the right hip. This is given to an individual after the sacrament or initiation of *upnayana* or thread-ceremony. The moral and social duties of human life are worn on our shoulders and kept attached to our hearts in symbolic form as the sacred thread of *yagyopavita* (*Sutra*). It also hangs on our back. It has tied us from all sides, as a reminder of the moral disciplines and ethical duties as human beings.

In different *sampradayas* or schools of thought, spiritual lineages, the *yagyopavit* (*sutra*) will have different numbers of threads, such as six threads and two knots, each joining three threads together, or nine threads and three knots. The knots are symbols of the three *granthis* (extrasensory roots of ultimate realizations) - the *Brahma-granthis*, the *Vishnu-granthis*, and the *Shiva-granthis*; these also represent the three segments of the Gayatri Mantra that encode the sublime streams of manifestation of the omnipresent eternal sound of "Om". The nine threads symbolize the nine planets and the nine divine-powers (manifestations of *shakti*, called the *nav-durgas*) implied in the nine words (after the *sirsa*) of the Gayatri Mantra. The *yagyopavit* is like an image of the deity Gayatri. You enshrine the deity in the temple of your body by wearing it.

Wearing this sacred *sutra* on the shoulders, keeping it near the chest, should remind you of the nine duties, nine virtues, nine principles that are taught and inspired through the nine words of the Gayatri Mantra, which are industriousness, humility, austerity, orderliness, cooperation, wisdom, integrity of character, sense of responsibility and courage.

These nine qualities open the door to a bright, happy and successful life. Inculcation of these qualities induces eminent transformation of personality. These are also the most desired virtues for social and global welfare and progress. The first five of these deal with behavior and deeds. Industriousness means constructive utilization of time and potentials with diligence and enthusiasm for the work in hand. Humility implies modesty, etiquette, and balanced and humble behavior with due respect for the self as well as for others. Austerity includes piety of mind and body. It also means adopting the principle of "simple living & high thinking" in daily life. You must note that foresighted, constructive and altruist use of the resources becomes possible by observing austerity in personal life.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SAFFRON FLAG

The Bhagwa Dhwaja (Saffron Flag) is the symbol of Sanatana Dharma or Hindu culture from times immemorial. The word 'Bhagwa' connotes that it comes from 'Bhagavan' meaning God. It stands for wealth, dharma, advancement, glory, knowledge, and detachment. The combination of these six is 'Bhagwa'. The flag also embodies the glorious orange hue of the rising sun that dispels darkness and sheds light all around.



The saffron (orange) color of the flag is the color of the fire and its flames. The fire is the great purifier and all sacrifices are offered to the fire. It stands for the principle of sacrifice. The color of the flag is the same as the color at sunrise and sunset. When the day dawns the sun rises and reminds everyone to shake off ones lethargy and do one's duty. The sun burns throughout the day giving life to one and all and without demanding anything in return. The time of sunset teaches us to give

everything for the society without any expectation.

The shape of the Dhwaja consists of two triangles, the upper triangle being shorter than the lower one. The triangles represent the rising flames of burning fire. The flames rise in the upward direction, only-those rising from the bottom being the longest. They teach us to rise above and become better always.

The Bhagwa flag has existed and guided the Vedic society right from its origin. It has inspired and has been honored by the Vedic Saints and heroes. In ancient times, the warriors used to put on saffron robes and go to the battlefield. If they are victorious, they will rule and if vanquished, they might die on the battlefield and thus go to heaven--such was the motivating force for the heroes.

The people in the ancient times worshipped the Sun because it was the source of energy, light and heat without which life can't exist. The Bhagwa flag inspires us to live the life full of sublime virtues based on sacrifice, renunciation and service.

THE PURPOSE OF TOUCHING OUR HEAD TO THE FLOOR

When entering a temple, coming before the Deity, or when seeing a great saint or devotee, many people will bow and touch their heads to the floor. This is called offering obeisances. Humility is an important quality in spiritual life, and bowing down in such a way is an outward expression of the desire to go beyond the ego. Lowering the head to the floor represents the surrender of self-importance and pride.

Sometimes you will also see a person stretch the whole body out on the floor. In Sanskrit this is called *dandavat*, falling like a *danda* or rod. This is considered the most humble way of showing respect for another.

POINTS ABOUT DHARMA

WHAT IS DHARMA

Dharma is defined as a pivotal code of righteous conduct for human behavior on which rests peace, harmony, and the coexistence of all species in the nature (animate and inanimate). Dharma is also in reference to the duties and nature of the individual, and Sanatana-Dharma is specifically in reference to the eternal nature of the each of us as spiritual beings. Sanatana-Dharma also means the eternal religion or the real identity and occupation of the soul. Thus, the whole Vedic system is to arrange life so that we all can reawaken ourselves to the real nature of the soul, which is necessary in order to reach the spiritual dimension and become free from *samsara*, or future rounds of continued birth and death in a material body.

For this purpose, Vedic Dharma is a treasury of the principles defining the right human conduct that have been discovered and practiced for many millennia and found to be true and thus may be considered true for all times and places, which is what makes it “Santana-Dharma”. (You can also read my article on my website called “[Sanatana-Dharma, Its Real Meaning](#)” for more information.)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DHARMA AND RELIGION

There is no word in English or any other language that may be equivalent to or in near term carry the same meaning as Dharma in Sanskrit or in other Indian languages. However, the word 'Religion' is often used for 'Dharma' in foreign languages, which is not quite accurate.

Unlike other religions that are based on 'One Book' (Christianity on Holy Bible and Islam on Holy Koran) and 'One Savior-Christ in Christianity' and 'One Prophet Muhammad in Islam', Vedic/Hindu Dharma is not based on one book or one messenger or prophet. It is pluralistic in its approach to realize the ultimate Truth. Each individual has to strive for his or her own destiny. It is a law of '*Karma*'. It is not based on any miracle, as is the case in other religions. It is not even based on a group of people who started a religion following the instructions and after the name of their teacher. These criteria do not apply to Vedic Dharma.

It is not a dogma given for others to believe, but it is a process of investigation, practice, and purifying ourselves so we can have our own spiritual realizations, perception and experience of our own true spiritual identity and relationship with God. Thus, the individual has the freedom to decide what is best to learn whatever they need to learn in this lifetime for their own ultimate spiritual progress. This is a big difference between conventional religion that we find today and that of Vedic Dharma.

Therefore, Vedic Dharma is much more than just a system of faith and worship. It is a philosophy of 'LIVE AND LET LIVE'. It encourages the freedom of thinking resulting into different interpretations of the same principle. This is why there is so much apparent diversity in Hindu thoughts.

WHO STARTED VEDIC/HINDU DHARMA

No one individual started the Vedic process. Vedic Dharma contains a treasury of spiritual laws that were discovered and realized by unknown number of sages and saints over many millennia

and were compiled into the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* and later in many additional books in the form of explanations and stories as the situation and time demanded. The thing to understand is that the *Vedas* were not originated or composed by anyone. They are revelations that were recorded. The spiritual knowledge that became the *Vedas* and Vedic literature are part of the *Shabda Brahman*, or the spiritual vibration that exists eternally, within and without the material energy and manifestation, and before, during, and after the creation and annihilation of the cosmic manifestation. Sages who were and are capable of entering that spiritual dimension, or have glimpses into that strata, can easily realize and imbibe the knowledge that exists in that realm and then prescribe or compose them for the benefit of all of humanity. Thus, we also can gain access to that realm to the degree in which our consciousness becomes spiritualized. (Please read my ebook on "[The Complete Review of the Vedic Literature](#)" for a comprehensive analysis of the Vedic library of information, which is also on my website at: www.stephen-knapp.com.)

HOW OLD IS THE VEDIC/HINDU DHARMA

As we mentioned in the previous point, it is based on the *Shabda-Brahman*, the spiritual vibration which is eternal and exists from before, during, and after the material creation. Therefore, the Dharma is as old as the human race on earth. The human civilization first evolved in India (Aryavarta was its name then), which is certainly many millennia older than the period of Rama and Krishna. The period of Krishna is more than 5000 years old and Rama's period preceded that of Krishna by many millennia. The knowledge of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* was being passed orally from generation to generation and ultimately was compiled more than 5000 years ago. It was the great sage and *avatara* known as Vedavyasa who composed the Vedic knowledge into written form for the benefit of humanity, who he could see was losing its intelligence for remembering deep philosophy. Vedic Dharma is certainly much older than 5000 years and therefore much older than any other existing religion. Christianity is 2000 years old and Islam only about 1500 years old. Older than these two major practicing religions are Buddhism and Jainism, which are more than 2600 years old. Both Buddhism and Jainism evolved out of Hinduism providing major emphasis on *Ahimsa* (non-violence) that was the need of the time.

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF HINDUTVA

It is a cultural (Sanskritic) concept of unity and interdependent freedom. It is an instrument for social equality, justice, and freedom to choose any *Ishta Devata* (personal god, meaning any faith). It embraces a political doctrine "appeasement for none and justice for all". It also defines an economic system where a person is an integral part and not a pawn on the economic chessboard. It also envisions a system of coexistence in that no religion has the right even to try to obliterate any other religion.

HINDUTVA AND OTHER FAITHS

Vedic/Hindu *Dharma* does provide the freedom of thinking and therefore, other religions are covered. The followers of other faiths have full freedom to practice their beliefs because such freedom is normal in the Vedic culture, but no particular religion is free to annihilate others of different faiths.

DEFINITION OF HINDU RASHTRA

Hindu *Rashtra* or Hindu Nation is a *Sanskritic* (cultural) concept in contrast to a political one as

seen advocated in the western countries. Hindus have a distinct culture. Wherever, the Hindu way of life is practiced is a Hindu Rashtra. India was and is a Hindu Rashtra according to this concept. This is very vividly defined in our scriptures. There is nothing new about it. Chanakya Pandit had given a clarion call to unite Hindus (called Bharatiya at that time) in the name of *Hindu Rashtra* about 2350 years ago. Emperor Chandragupta ruled over that nation and that dynasty continued for over 200 years - a golden period of Indian history.

THE EMPHASIS ON OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIA

India is our '*Punya Bhoomi*' or worshipable Motherland and the nation of our ancestors. It is this land where the eternal principles of *Sanatana Dharma* were discovered and practiced for many millennia before they were compiled. The philosophy and culture that evolved in this land are very distinct and vibrant for which we should be proud. It is this land where a clarion call was given to all humanity to pursue the goal of becoming higher spiritual beings and realize the ultimate Truth. Thus, we should work to keep the ancient traditions of India, and keep it as the homeland of a dynamic and thriving Vedic culture.

FACTS ON SYMBOLS AND TRADITIONS

WHAT THE SWASTIKA REPRESENTS

The Swastika  is a symbol of auspiciousness (Swasti - auspiciousness). Literally, Swastika means 'of good fortune' - 'su' means 'well' and 'asti' means 'being'. It has been used as a symbol of the Sun or of Vishnu. It is a solar symbol, spreading out in all four directions. It symbolizes the cosmos and the progress of the Sun through space. It derives its auspiciousness from the four-fold principles of divinity. Brahma is said to be four-faced. It also represents the world-wheel, the eternally changing world, round a fixed and unchanging center, God.

Religious texts explain that the eight arms of the Swastika are symbolic of the earth, fire, water, air, sky, mind, emotions, and feelings. The four main arms point in four directions. They represent the four eras – Satya-yuga, Treta-yuga, Dwapara-yuga and Kali-yuga. They also represent the four *varnas* - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. They represent the four ashrams of life too - Brahmacharya, Grihasta, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa. The four arms are also symbolic of the four basic aims of human pursuit - *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (prosperity), *kama* (passion) and *moksha* (salvation). They are also symbolic of the four faces and four hands of Brahma and of the four *Vedas* - *Rig-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, and *Atharva-Veda*. They are also symbolic of the four constellations - Pushya (8th), Chitra (14th), Shravan (22nd) and Revti (27th).

Since ancient times Hindus use this symbol on auspicious occasions like marriage, Lakshmi-puja, etc. Swastika marks depicted on doors or walls of buildings are believed to protect them from the wrath of evil spirits or furies of nature. Hindus worship Swastika as symbol of Ganesha. In Hindu astronomy the auspicious form of the Swastika represents the celestial change of the Sun to the tropic of Capricorn.

There are two kinds of Swastika symbols mentioned in the ancient scriptures. The right-handed Swastika is associated with the Sun, and hence emblem of the world-wheel indicating cosmic possession and evolution thereof, around a fixed center. The left-handed Swastika, which

moves anti-clockwise, represents the Sun during the autumn and winter, and is regarded as inauspicious. According to some accounts the right-handed Swastika symbolizes Ganesha and stands for auspiciousness whereas left-handed one personifies goddess Kali and stands for night and destruction.

In all social ceremonies the right-handed Swastika is used and has become an object of great veneration.

The counterclockwise Swastika, though not as common, is used in some *tantrika* practices. Incidentally, the Swastika, as adopted by the Nazis was also the counterclockwise type. Thus, it brought ruination. As scholars like Prof. Max Muller also pointed out, this design was also favored in some orthodox Christian churches and was popular several hundred years ago in England, and also in varied forms in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. For example, the related symbol in Sweden had the arms of the counterclockwise Swastika design expanded and connected to each other along a circular contour; which appears like a cross embedded in a circle.

According to Vedic philosophy, the four arms of the Swastika symbolize the four *Vedas*, four *Varnas*, four *Ashrams*, four *Lokas* or planetary systems, and the four deities - Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh (Shiva), and Ganesh. Eminent Vedic scholar Pt. Ramchandra Shastri further cites that the design of the Swastika resembles a four-petaled lotus (*chaturdala kamal*) which symbolizes the abode of Lord Ganapati (Ganesh) and is therefore worshiped in religious ceremonies and also enshrined at the places of worship. Several savants also regard the Swastika as the symbol of the Kaustubh Mani present on the chest of Lord Vishnu.

It was also a useful sign in commercial records in the ancient times and a symbol of fire, electricity, lightening, water, magnet, etc. Yet other researchers have also said that the Swastika, the symbol of auspiciousness and well-being, as designed by the Indian *rishis* (sages) of the Vedic age, was well received and recognized by the different civilizations across the globe who adopted it in various forms of similar designs. Thus, this symbol, along with other marks of the Vedic Culture, carries the spirit of enlightening thoughts and wisdom, the flow of which brings humankind to a higher level of consciousness.

Prof. Max Muller is among the noted European scholars who had studied Sanskrit language and the Vedic literature and also written commentaries there on. Commenting on the global propagation of the Swastika symbol, he once wrote in a letter to Dr. Schloman indicating that - this Vedic symbol could be found in Rome, Milan, Pompia, and perhaps in almost every part of Italy, in some ancient cities of England, at several places in Hungary, Greece, China, and in many other parts of the world. He has also supported the views of E. Thomas, where the latter has described the Swastika as a symbol of the continuous motion of the sun (and the solar system).

In the *Ganesh Purana* it is said that the Swastika is a form of Lord Ganesh. It is necessary that this be made before beginning any auspicious work. It has the power to remove all obstacles. Those who ignore it may fail. It is therefore customary to make all beginnings with the Swastika.

The Swastika is also known as 'Satiya', which is symbolic of the Sudarshan Chakra. People also consider it as a symbol denoting plus (+). That makes it a symbol of prosperity. The four dots around the Swastika are symbolic of the four directions around us.

THE MEANING OF OM

Om is the Akshara, or imperishable syllable. *Om* is the Universe, and this is the exposition of Om. The past, the present and the future, all that was, all that is, all that will be, is *Om*. Likewise,

all else that may exist beyond the bounds of time, that too is Om. -- *Mandukya Upanishud*

Om is the sacred sound of Brahman. Of all the Vedic verses (Mantras) the most powerful and significant one is the single-syllable incantation called *Pranava*. The *Pranava* or OM is the universally accepted symbol of Hinduism, Vedic culture. Literally the word *Pranava* means "That by which God is effectively praised." It also means, "That which is ever new."

Pranava or Om has been extolled highly in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-gita* as also in other scriptures. It is believed one's own beastly nature may be conquered by repeatedly chanting OM.

The *Yajur-Veda* exhorts us to try to realize Brahman through repeating and remembering OM. The *Kathopanishad* declares that Om is Parabrahman (the Absolute Self) Itself. The *Mandukyopanishud* advises the spiritual aspirants to meditate on the unity of the Atman (the self) with Brahman (God) using OM for *Japa* (repeated chanting). Shri Krishna states in the Geeta that He is OM among words and that all religious rites are started with the chanting of OM. Not only that, if anyone succeeds in chanting OM at the time of his death, simultaneously thinking of God, he will attain the highest Truth. The *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali declare that *Pranava* is the symbol of God and that one can attain *Samadhi* by its repetition, and meditation on Him.

The symbol Om is used for invocation, benediction, ritual worship, festivals, and religious ceremonies. It represents five separate sounds: 'A' 'U' 'M' plus the nasalization and resonance of the sound. It is said that within the 'AUM', Vishnu is 'A', Brahma is 'U' and Shiva is 'M'; *bindu* (dot) is the trinity in unity while the *nada* (crescent) symbolizes transcendence. In the *Upanishads*, however, AUM is the symbol of the *nirguna* (formless) Brahman, without attributes, beyond human consciousness and duality (*pranava*).

Also, AUM is expressed as consisting of three independent letters A, U, and M, each of which has its own meaning and significance. The letter 'A' represents the beginning (*Adimatwa*), 'U' represents progress (*Utkarsha*) and 'M' represents limit or dissolution (*Miti*). Hence the word AUM represents that Power responsible for creation, development and dissolution of this Universe, namely God Himself. The first manifesting word of God is Om.

Om (aum) became the sacred word *hum* of the Tibetans, *amin* of the Moslems, and *amen* of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Christians. *Amen* in Hebrew means - sure, faithful. The biblical passage, John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The New Testament declares that in the beginning God was the Word. According to the Bible, then, this means the pure sound vibration, or *Shabda Brahman*, from which all things manifest, including the eternal spiritual knowledge.

As a translator and scholar of *Bagavad Gita*, Barbara S. Miller notes, "According to the ancient Indian traditions preserved in the *Upanishads*, all speech and thought are derived from the one self-existent sound - *Om*. It expresses the ultimate reality." Also, Georg Feuerstein in "The Yoga Tradition" says: "The syllable of *Om* is held to be or to express the pulse of the cosmos itself. It was through meditative practice rather than intellectual speculation that the seers and sages of Vedic times arrived at the idea of a universal sound, eternally resounding in the universe, which they 'saw' as the very origin of the created world."

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONCH SHELL (SHANKHA)

This is not only a symbol, but an instrument used in worship in the temple. When blown, it is said to produce a sound like the sacred Om,. It is also said that an adept yogi can subliminally hear the *sankhanadi* (sound of the perfect blowing of a *shankha*) within himself

during the higher stages of meditation in *Nadayoga Sadhana*. When the conch is blown with controlled breath, the primordial sound of Om (Aum), the vibration of the universe, emanates from it. This eternal sound is said to be the origin of all *Vedas*. All knowledge enshrined in the *Vedas* is an elaboration of the omnipresent sublime sound of Om. It was this sound that was chanted by the Lord before manifesting the cosmos. It represents the creation and the Truth behind it. It represents Dharma or righteousness that is one of the four noble goals of human life.

According to Vedic terminology, that which leads to welfare is also called *shankha*. It is also with the sounding of the conch that the doors of the temple sanctums are opened. Another well-known purpose of blowing the conch is that it produces auspicious sounds, and can ward off negative vibrations or noises that may disturb the ambience or the minds of the devotees. Even now, in some places, when the village temple begins its worship, the conch is blown, and everyone who can hear it stops for a moment or even pays their mental obeisances to the deity in the temple.

The *shankhas* that open towards the left hand (*vaamavarti*), when the narrow end is pointed toward you, are commonly available, but rare are the ones that open towards right side (i.e., facing South) when the pointed end is toward you. This kind of *shankha* is called *dakshinavarti*. South is the direction of Kubera, the God of wealth. *Tantra Shastra* has also given great importance to such types of shells. These shells are very rare and are found only in a very few places. *Dakshinavarti shankhas* not only bring wealth but also purify the atmosphere. All the negative energies are swept out of the place. *Dakshinavarti shankhas* are available in white color and with brown lines on them. Their sizes differ, starting from the size of a wheat grain to as large as a coconut. Mostly these shells are available only at Kanya Kumari. A completely white colored *shankha* is indeed rare.

Dakshinavarti shankha is the symbol of Goddess Lakshmi. Her deities and pictures always depict *dakshinavarti shankha* in one of Her hands. *Dakshinavarti shankha* should be kept at the place of worship or, after being wrapped in a white cloth, at any sacred place in the house. It is said to bring good luck and prosperity to the individual and his family. In the *Puranas*, the gods and goddesses are depicted as holding a shell, whenever they are happy or setting out on a fight against evil forces. Whenever the shell is blown it is said to purify the environment from all evil effects. Blowing of a *shankha* enhances the positive psychological vibrations, such as courage, hope, determination, willpower, optimism, etc., in the blower as well as those around him/her.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE KALASH OR SACRED POT

The symbol of the *kalash* or sacred pot is physically represented by a metal or earthen pitcher or urn. It is generally filled with water during rituals (preferably the water of the holy Ganga, any sacred river or clean, running water). Its top open end holds betel or mango leaves, and a red-yellow sanctified thread (*kalawa* or *mauli*) is tied around its neck. This *kalash* is placed on the *pujavedi* (worship dais or table) near the deities or pictures of the deity. It is placed facing the North, in the center. This positioning signifies balance; balance that one needs to achieve success in every walk of life. Often it is topped by a coconut or a *deepak* and kept on the sacred Vedic Swastika symbol or a Vedic Swastika is drawn on it by using wet vermilion, sandal-wood powder and turmeric. The *kalash* has many symbolic meanings and teachings associated with it as described below.

During worship or rituals, leaves from some select trees are used as essential accessories,

but among them all, the betel leaf (*pana*) enjoys a place of pride in India. In Hindu weddings, a betel leaf is tucked into the headgears of the bride and the groom. The betel leaf is symbolic of freshness and prosperity. The *Skanda Purana* says that the betel leaf was obtained by the demigods during the grand ocean-churning. The use of betel leaf in India is mentioned in the great epics, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as in Buddhist and Jain literature.

The *kalash*, tied with the *kalawa*, and having betel or mango leaves atop, symbolizes the cosmos. The water inside the *kalash* represents the primordial waters, elixir of life or the soul filled with love and compassion, abundance, and hospitality. *Varuna*, the Lord of the oceans and the divine source of water element, is invoked while filling a *kalash* with water. In some cultures, the *kalash* is said to represent the body, the leaves the five senses, and water the life-force. Some Vedic scriptures refer it as a symbol of the mother earth and divine consciousness.

The word meaning of the scriptural hymns of the *kalash's* worship describe the mouth, throat, and base of the *kalash* as seats of Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, and Lord Brahma respectively, whereas the belly represents all goddesses and Divine-mother's power streams. Thus, in this small urn the presence of all the demigods and goddesses is symbolized. This exemplifies that all the gods are essentially one and are emanations of the same Supreme Power.

THE COCONUT

The coconut (*Nariyala*) on top of the *kalash* is a symbol of the Godhead - the three eyes symbolic of the eyes of Lord Shiva. In India, for success in an important undertaking, the beginning is done with the breaking of a sanctified coconut. All religious functions and rituals start with the worship of the coconut, along with the *kalash*, since it is regarded as symbolic of Lord Ganesha, the deity who helps in the successful completion of any undertaking.

Sage Vishwamitra is said to have got the first coconut tree grown on this earth by the power of his *tapas*, or austerities. Its hard shell inspires one to have tolerance and do hard work for attaining success. The coconut is also broken before a deity in the temple, signifying the soul's breaking out of the shell of the ego. People get strength and improved eyesight by eating its white kernel. The sick and the elderly find its water nourishing and ladies apply its oil for healthy hair. It has glucose, phosphorous, and carbohydrates in good quantity and is also good for diabetes.

Ancient Indian healers used to burn its outer shell to prepare tooth powder, eyebrow creams, and ointments for burns. Every part of the coconut plant is very beneficial to humans. Hence, most Indians consider it a good omen to receive or give coconut fruits as gifts. It is also called *shreephal* because it denotes prosperity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEEPAK (THE SACRED OIL OR GHEE LAMP)

Together with the *kalash* the lighted *deepak* is also placed on the *pujavedi* or altar and worshiped. As a physical object, a *deepak* or lamp is an earthen (or metallic) saucer-like tiny pot filled with *ghee* (clarified butter) or refined oil with a twisted cotton tape (ball) immersed in it. It is lighted in every Hindu household and temple in India. The cotton tape keeps sucking the *ghee* to yield a soothing bright light, a flame. In nature, the flame is considered to be the source of heat and light. The heat of the fire and hence the flame is also a good germicide.

The *deepak* is worshipped as the symbol of the all-pervading Light of all Lights. Some scientific models and theories today also agree that all matter has emanated from the light of

consciousness-force. This great Effulgence is worshipped through the medium of the *deepak*. Meditation on the standing bright yellow flame of a *Deepak* during *tratak yoga* improves mental concentration and induces sublime energy of positive currents emanating from this symbol of cosmic consciousness.

A *deepak* is also used during *arati* – the devotional worship and prayer sung at a religious celebration or ritual of worship to the temple deities. The *deepak* (*arati* flame) is moved around the deity to symbolize the divine aura and also to help the devotees to have a clear look of the deity. This is usually done with four circles to the feet, two to the waist, four to the head, and seven to the whole body. In the end, as the lamp is passed around, the devotees put their palms on the *arati* flame to receive the *arati* aura, symbolizing the acceptance of divine light that can open one's consciousness.

The standing *deepak* (*Samai* or *Kuttuvilaku*) symbolizes the dispelling of ignorance and awakening of the divine light within us. Its soft glow illumines the temple or the shrine room, keeping the atmosphere pure and serene. The lamp is also a symbol for the Vedic festival of Diwali (Deepavali), an Indian festival of lights. One of many interpretations of Diwali is a celebration of the light of knowledge that chases away the darkness of ignorance.

Visualizing the *kalash* as a symbol of the cosmos and *deepak* as a symbol of cosmic energy may not be so easy for us. But we should at least assimilate the teachings apparent from them - the soothing coolness (calmness) and uniformity (impartiality) of the *kalash*, and the radiance, energy (activeness) and steadfast uprightness of the *deepak*.

THE PURPOSE OF YANTRAS

Yantras are generally geological designs imprinted on a copper or silver plate. These days we also see them in multi-colored inks on paper. Among the sacred symbols manifested by the Vedic Rishis, *yantras* are predominantly regarded as devices for devotional *sadhanas* or practices, and as objects to direct our mind and worship. These are used as tools for mental concentration and meditation. Keeping a specific *yantra* in a particular direction in the home, and worshipping it and concentrating upon it is said to have distinct auspicious effects. A mantra is the generator of specific currents of sublime sound and its perceivable manifestation; a yantra is a monogram - a spectrograph of this sonic energy. In terms of their spiritual effects, yantras are like schematic sketches of the contours or structures of divine energy fields.

Likewise the images of gods in the temples, yantras are revered and worshiped as symbols of divine powers. The *Devi Bhagavat* (3|26|21) states - *Archabhava Tatha Yantram*; meaning - a yantra symbolizes a divine power. Similar meanings are indicated in *Naradiya Purana*, *Gautamiya Tantra*, *Yogini Tantra*, and several other Vedic scriptures.

Yantras are also referred as the abodes of the divine powers of God, or of the deity that it represents. This is why most of the Vedic yantras are named after different divinities, such as, Ganesa-yantra, Sri-yantra, Gopala-yantra, etc. Each yantra needs to be installed with the use of particular mantras, similar to the temple installation of a deity. Which yantra is placed in which direction and how its worship and devotional *sadhana* is to be performed - the knowledge of these constitutes a science in itself that has linkage with the Vedic cosmology and sciences of mantra, Tantra, and Vastu.

A dot (.) in the cryptography of yantra symbolizes absoluteness, completeness. In terms of the manifestation of Nature in the universe, it is a symbol of the nucleus of cosmic energy and hence represents the power-source of all activities and motion. Its spiritual implication is pure

knowledge, enlightenment, and ultimate realization. The expansions of a dot in circular forms, in a yantra, symbolize related expressions in varied forms. Combining the dots results in a triangle. Different lengths of the straight lines joining the dots, different angles between them, and the different triangular and other shapes generated thereby together with free dots, circles, straight, curvilinear, convergent, and divergent lines are the basic features/components of the structure of a yantra.

Everything that exists in the cosmos has some size and structure - perceivable or conceptualized - in subliminal, astronomical or intermediate dimensions. Even the invisible subtle entities have 'shapes' which could be 'seen' through mental eyes. The sagacious minds of the Vedic Age had deeper insight to 'see' the invisible or sublime elements of nature and express them in a universal language of symbols. They had thus invented a coding system of symbols, signs and alphabets (including digits) to represent the syllables of the seed mantras associated with the sublime fields of divine powers (*devatas*), natural tendencies of consciousness, emotional impulses in a being, etc; and the five basic elements (*pancha-tatvas*), their etheric vibrations and energy fields, and the states and motions of the enormous varieties of sub-atomic, atomic, and molecular structures generated thereby. Specific configurations of these codes were then incorporated in different yantras. Thus, by meditating on the yantras, and using particular mantras to invoke their potencies, would also awake higher powers within the mind and consciousness of the *sadhaka*, or practitioner, if done properly.

A brief description of some of the popular yantras is given below.

Shri Yantra: Through this yantra one attains the favor of Lakshmi and is never short of money. By reciting Lakshmi prayers to it everyday, one attains all benefits.

Shri Mahamrityunjay Yantra: This yantra protects one from destructive influences like accidents, crises, sickness, epidemic, and similar life-threatening calamities.

Baglamukhi Yantra: This is to overcome enemies or obstacles and gain favorable verdicts in legal cases.

Bisa Yantra: God helps those who have the Bisa yantra in all endeavors. All difficult things become easy. By praying to it every morning obstacles are overcome and one attains success and honor.

Kuber Yantra: This yantra makes Kuber, the god of wealth, benevolent.

Shri Kanakdhara Yantra: It helps in attaining wealth and dispelling poverty and ensures many blessings.

Shri Mahalakshmi Yantra: With prayers to this yantra one is assured of perpetual prosperity.

Surya Yantra: It promotes good health and well-being, protects one from diseases and promotes intellect.

Panchadashi Yantra: This yantra has the blessings of Lord Shiva and ensures morality, wealth, family happiness, and salvation.

Of all yantras the one that brings results the most quickly is the *Shri yantra*. With successful prayer and offerings, all the four basic human pursuits are attained, such as *dharma* - discharge of duty, *artha* - acquirement of wealth, *kama* - gratification and *moksha* - final emancipation. The Vedas say that 33 crore gods and goddesses reside in the *Shri yantra*. This yantra can also eliminate Vaastu shortcomings. The origin and development of the universe is depicted in this yantra.

The *Durga Saptshati* says: With worship the primordial power gives happiness, enjoyment, and pleasures of heaven.

There is a story pertaining to the origin of the *Shri yantra*. Once at Kailash Mansarovar, Adi Shankaracharya underwent great penance and pleased Lord Shiva. When Lord Shiva offered a blessing, Shankaracharya inquired whether universal welfare could be attained. In response, Lord Shiva gave him the *Shri yantra*, an embodiment of Lakshmi, along with the *Shri Sukta* mantra.

Shri yantra is the place of worship of goddess Bhagwati Mahatripura Sundari, an embodiment of Brahma. She resides in the circles. Her chariot as well as the subtle form and symbol is there. Any prayer offered to Rajeshwari (a monarch), Kameshwari (one who grants wishes) and Mahatripura Sundari without the *Shri yantra* brings no results. All gods and goddesses dependent upon Mahatripura Sundari reside in the *Shri yantra*.

Mahatripura Sundari has been referred to in religious texts with names like Vidya (knowledge), Maha Vidya (best knowledge) and Param Vidya (ultimate knowledge).

There is a story about the effectiveness of the *Shri yantra*. Once, unhappy with her visit to earth, Ma Lakshmi returned home to Vaikuntha. Due to her absence, many problems emerged on earth. Maharishi Vasishtha sought the help of Lord Vishnu to pacify Ma Lakshmi, without success. Then Devaguru Brihaspati explained that the best way to attract Lakshmi to the earth was through the *Shri yantra*. With worship of the *Shri yantra*, Ma Lakshmi immediately returned to earth and said, "*Shri yantra* is my foundation. My soul resides in it. Therefore, I had to return."

Worship to *Shri yantra* after *pran pratishtha* ensures happiness and liberation. The best occasions to establish a *Shri yantra* are Diwali, Dhanteras (two days before Diwali), Dashera, Akshay Tritiya (the third day of the lunar fortnight) and Pratipada (the first day of the lunar fortnight) and other auspicious days. At the time of worship one must face the east and pray with devotion and concentration.



The Shri Yantra

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHIVA LINGAM

One thing a person may be questioning is why Lord Shiva is so often represented as a *lingam*. *Linga* basically means a sign or symbol. So the *lingam* is essentially a symbol of the shapeless universal consciousness of Lord Shiva. "Shiva" also means that in which the creation lies dormant after the annihilation. So, one explanation is that the *lingam* is a representative of the dormant universal consciousness in which all created things rest after the cosmic annihilation. It also represents the *pradhana*, the potential but unmanifest ingredients of the material world. Another explanation is that Shiva means auspicious. So the *linga* is the shapeless symbol for the great god of auspiciousness. It is intended to bring the shapeless unknown into our attention.

The *yoni* upon which the *lingam* often sits represents the manifest universal energy. From the unmanifest comes the manifest energy, through which all other things are created. The *yoni*, which is

a symbol of Shakti, combined with the *lingam*, is a symbol of the eternal union of the paternal and maternal principles, or the positive and negative, or the static and dynamic energies of the Absolute Reality. It is the communion of the eternal consciousness and dynamic power of the Shakti, the source of all actions and changes. It is also the symbol for the creation of the universe through the combination of the active energy of Lord Shiva and his Shakti. This is how Lord Shiva and Durga are considered the parents of the universe. The symbolism of the *lingam* and *yonis* also represents the base of the spine, meaning the Muladhara *chakra*, upon which the *kundalini* is resting, waiting for awakening.

There are a few versions according to the *Puranas* of why Shiva is worshiped as a *lingam* and how this happened, of which I will relate one. There was a great sacrificial ceremony that was going to take place many hundreds of years ago. The great sage Narada Muni was invited to it and asked who would receive the effects of the sacrifice. No one could answer, so the sages who were present asked him who should receive it. Narada said that Sri Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva were all eligible, but they would have to find out which one had the most patience and purity to be the receiver of the sacrifice. So he chose the great sage Brighu to learn the answer.

Brighu had many mystic powers and was able to travel to the domain of the demigods. So first he went to see Lord Brahma, but Brahma was preoccupied and did not notice Brighu's presence. Feeling insulted, Brighu cursed Brahma, "You are so proud of your power of creation, you did not notice my arrival. For this you shall have no temples on earth." Thus, there are very few temples of Brahma on earth. Next, Brighu went to see Shiva in Kailash, but Shiva also did not notice Brighu's arrival. Brighu, again feeling offended, cursed Shiva to be worshiped only as a *lingam* on earth. This is the reason why Lord Shiva is primarily represented and worshiped as a *lingam* on this planet.

Then, to continue the story, Brighu went to see Lord Vishnu, who also did not recognize Brighu's presence. Brighu was so angered that he went forward and kicked Vishnu's chest. Lord Vishnu apologized if He had hurt Brighu's foot and began praising Brighu. Brighu immediately felt pleased and could understand that Vishnu was actually the most qualified to receive the offerings from the sacrifice. However, Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and Lord Vishnu's wife, was very displeased by Brighu's action and, therefore, does not bestow much mercy on the brahmanas who, as a result, are often without much money.

To explain the shape of the *lingam*, a Baana *linga* is egg-shaped and is meant to show that Ishvara has neither beginning nor end. The Lingobhavamurti form of the *linga* is said to be the prime manifestation of the formless, which Shiva is said to have manifested exactly at midnight on Shivaratri. This is why everyone stays up until midnight and then worships that form during the Shivaratri festival. A representation of the Lingobhavamurti can often be found in a niche on the outside wall of the sanctum in any important Shiva temple.

The *lingas* in the temples are often formed in three parts. The lowest part is the base square called the Brahmabhaga or Brahma-pitha, which represents the creator Brahma. The next part in the middle is the octagonal Vishnubhaga or Vishnu-pitha, which signifies Lord Vishnu the sustainer. Both of these parts form the pedestal. The top cylindrical portion is the Rudrabhaga or Shiva-pitha, which is also called the Pujabhaga since this is the worshipable part. The top portion is also meant to symbolize the projecting flame of fire. This flame also represents the destructive aspects as well as the preserving power of God.

There are twelve important Jyotirlinga (self-manifested *linga*) temples scattered across India. They are found at Kedarnatha, Kashi Visvanatha, Somnatha, Baijnath, Ramesvare, Ghrisnesvar, Bhimasankar, Mahakala, Mallikarjuna, Amalesvar, Nagesvar, and Tryambakesvar. The five Pancha

Bhuta *lingas* in India are located at Kalahastisvar, Jambukesvar, Arunachalesvar, Ekambesvara at Kanchipuram, and Nataraja at Chidambaram. The temple of Lord Mahalinga at Tiruvidaimarudur (Madhyarjuna) is also a great temple in South India.

The reason Lord Shiva is often worshiped by pouring Ganges water over the *lingam* is that it represents the Ganges descending from heaven on to Shiva's head. The legend is that when the Ganges first began to flow to the earthly planet from the heavenly region, the force of it would have destroyed the earth. To prevent this, Lord Shiva agreed to let the river first fall on his head before it formed into a river. It is also explained that when worshipers pour milk or Ganga water on the *linga*, it represents the pouring of ghee on the sacred fire in the fire ceremony, or *yajna*. This is the symbolic offering of ourselves to God.

One story in connection with the Shiva *linga* is found in the *Linga Purana*. It describes that once Lord Brahma, the god of creation, and Lord Vishnu, the God of protection, engaged in an argument on who was greater. When those two great gods were fighting between themselves, Lord Shiva appeared as a huge pillar of fire that spread across the universe. He told Brahma and Vishnu that whoever finds the head or foot of his form of flame would be considered greater. Then Brahma took the form of a swan and set out to reach the top of the flame. Vishnu took the form of a boar to seek out the foot of the fire. But in spite of their efforts, they could not succeed in finding the limits. They realized their mistake and the peerless greatness of Lord Shiva. This shows how Shiva cannot be approached through ego, but responds with love to those who surrender to him. In this pastime, Lord Shiva appeared in the form of the fiery *lingam* for their benefit. So they were considered blessed with additional insight for worshiping that oldest form of him. This form of Shiva who appeared from the flame is called Lingodbhava. This story is found in the *Shiva Purana* and other texts.

This further helps to show how the *lingam* is not formless nor really a form, but a symbol for the divinity of Lord Shiva. In Sanskrit, *linga* also means "mark". It is a mark or symbol of Lord Shiva in the same way that large puddles of water is an indication of heavy rains. It is an inference for something else, like the form of that which is formless and omnipotent.

Mercury Shiva *lingas* are known to be especially potent. Mercury is known as *parad* or *para* in Hindi. It is also known as *Shivadhatu*, literally *Shiva's metal*. In reality, it refers to Shiva's semen. Mercury has been equated with this, and is especially revered. Shiva *lingas* made from a variety of stones are held in great reverence. However, religious writers have equated a Shiva *linga* made of mercury with Shiva. It is said to possess divine qualities. Whenever a deity is made ceremoniously with a combination of mercury, it is said to be very effective. It is believed that whoever offers prayers to the mercury Shiva *linga* will be blessed and considered as having offered prayers to all Shiva *lingas* in the universe.

These blessings are equivalent to those from hundreds of *Ashwamedha yajnas*. Even the blessings gained from giving millions of cows in charity cannot equal this. Giving gold in charity also does not qualify one for as many blessings. It is said that in homes where prayers are offered regularly to the mercury Shiva *linga*, all kinds of comforts are available. Success reigns there as Shiva resides in these homes. In such places, *vaastu* shortcomings will be overlooked. Offering prayers every Monday to the mercury Shiva *linga* can also ward off tantric spells.

In the *Shiva Purana*, Shiva has said: "Whatever blessings are showered upon you on making offerings to millions of different Shiva *lingas*, these can be multiplied manifold when you personally offer prayers to the mercury Shiva *linga*. By a mere touch of the mercury Shiva *linga* one can achieve salvation."

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A SHALAGRAMA

On the banks of the river Gandaki in Nepal one comes across smooth, shining, black, egg-like stones that may have a hole, or be like a shell, or have round white lines or designs on them. These are known as Shalagramas. These are black stones with fossil ammonite. Devotees of Vishnu consider these stones sacred, believing that Vishnu resides in them. These are considered to be stones of great value by devotees. Religious texts mention that a home is not complete without a Shalagrama.

In the *Padma Purana*, it is said that in whatever homes you find a Shalagrama, that home is better than places of pilgrimage. Just by looking at a Shalagrama serious sins are absolved. Those who pray to it are specially blessed. Shalagrama is symbolic of the universal Vishnu. In the *Skanda Purana*, Shiva has narrated the importance of Shalagrama. Every year in the month of Kartik (Oct-Nov) on the twelfth day of the lunar month women conduct marriages between Shalagrama and Tulasi and offer new clothes and other items. Amongst Hindus the marriage season starts thereafter.

In the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* (Prakritikhand, chapter 21) it is said that wherever one finds a Shalagrama, Vishnu resides there. After completing several pilgrimages, Lakshmi also joins him. All kinds of sins are absolved. A Shalagrama has the ability to bless one with important positions, property, and prosperity. However, one must avoid keeping defective and damaged stones that are sharp, malformed, yellow or discolored. Such stones bring bad luck and create problems and must be disposed.

It is also believed that whoever sprinkles water that has been in contact with a Shalagrama shall be blessed as though he had visited places of pilgrimage and bathed in holy waters. By offering prayers one is blessed as though one has read the *Vedas*. Whoever bathes the Shalagrama with water everyday is blessed as though he has offered great charities. He is then free from the shackles of life and death. At the time of death it absolves one of all sins and one becomes worthy of living in Vishnu's company. It is believed that whoever looks after Tulasi, Shalagrama, and the conch shell, shall always be dear to Vishnu.

WHY THE COW IS CONSIDERED SACRED

In the Vedic culture, the cow is especially revered and regarded as one of our mothers. It is believed that all the demigods reside within the body of a cow. It is therefore the responsibility of every person to accord it respect and do one's duty by it. For most religious ceremonies the cow is essential.

The cow has been important since ancient times. Maharishi Vashistha once played his own life for the Kamadhenu, the celestial cow. Maharishi Chyavan preferred a cow to a kingdom. Such was the importance of the cow. Like a mother, the cow is known for the good it does mankind. It helps promote good health and long life. Similarly, the bull is known to have provided labor and power to help plow fields and develop agriculture. The dung from both the bull and cow has been used for centuries for fuel.

Religious texts say: The cow is a universal mother. The *Agni Purana* says that the cow is a pure, auspicious animal. Looking after a cow, bathing it and making it eat and drink are commendable acts. Cow dung and urine are said to have medicinal qualities and are known to contain antiseptic properties. The milk, curd, butter, and ghee are all used in religious ceremonies. Whoever offers a morsel of food to the cow attains spiritual merit. Whoever gives a

cow in charity benefits the whole family. Wherever a cow lives the place becomes purified. The touch and care of cows absolves one of sins.

In the *Atharva-Veda*, it is said: The cow is the mother of Rudras; she is a daughter of the Vasus; she is the sister of Surya. She is a storehouse of ghee that is like the celestial nectar.

In the *Markandeya Purana* it is explained that the welfare of the world depends upon the cow. The back of the cow is symbolic of the *Rig-Veda*, the body of *Yajur-Veda*, the mouth of the *Sama-Veda*, the neck of the household deity and the good deeds and the soft body hair are like the mantras. Cow dung and urine give peace and good health. Wherever a cow lives the virtues are never wasted. A cow always promotes contentment.

In the *Vishnu Smriti* it is said that the land on which cows live is pure. Cows are pure and auspicious. They promote the welfare of mankind. They help make a *yajna* successful. By serving cows one gets rid of sins. Their dwelling is like a pilgrimage. One becomes virtuous through reverence of cows.

The *Skanda Purana* also explains that cow dung purifies the courtyard and temple.

The *Atharva-Veda* also relates that cow's milk helps overcome debility and regain lost physical and mental health. It promotes intelligence.

In the *Bhagavad-gita*, Sri Krishna said, "Amongst cows, I am Kamadhenu."

The *Mahabharata* relates that a cow given in charity becomes like Kamadhenu through its virtues and returns to the donor in the next birth. Through her virtues the cow protects the donor from the darkness of hell just as air protects and guides a boat from sinking and helps it steer through the vast ocean of life. Just as a mantra acts like a medicine to destroy disease, in the same way a cow given in charity to a good person protects one from all sins.

In the *Mahabharata*, *Kurma Purana*, *Yagyavalkya Smriti*, and several other Vedic texts, it is said that whoever gives a cow in charity shall always be happy and content and attain heaven after death. It is believed that after death, before heaven one reaches the Vaitarni River. To cross it one can hold the tail of the cow (as a sign and indication of respect for it) and finally reach heaven (the higher planetary systems).

The respect given to the cows and bulls is also representative of the respect that followers of Vedic culture give toward all animals and creatures created by God. All such beings have their place and purpose in the world. Elephants, horses, mules, camels, yak, reindeer, and even the simple donkey have helped mankind in their own way. The sheep gave mankind wool. The silk worm provided silk thread. The bee gives honey. Even the pig did not refrain from providing bristles used in many ways. Living in harmony with animals is an essential part of the Vedic way of life.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RED THREAD TIED AROUND THE WRIST

It is customary for Hindus to tie a red thread - commonly called a *mauli* or *kalava* - on the wrist at the beginning of a religious ceremony. The thread is tied on the right wrist of men and the left wrist of women. The literal meaning of *mauli* is 'above all'. Here the reference is to the head that stands high. With the moon perched on top of Shiva's head he is referred to as *Chandramauli*.

A person often puts on the red thread on one's wrist when doing a ceremony, ritual or *puja*, such as worship to the Ganga River, a deity, or for certain blessings. The thread helps preserve or imbibe those blessings when it is tied around one's wrist during the ceremony. The practice of tying the thread dates back to the time when Vamana Bhagwan tied this holy thread on the wrist of the progressive King Bali to grant him immortality.

The thread can also be called a *rakhi*, and is put on the brother by the sister to show the sister's familial love. The knots in the thread are said to hold the love of the sister when she tied the knot. Thus, the brother wears the *rakhi* as a sign of his sister's love and wishes for protection. In other arrangements, the knots tied in the *rakhi* as the red strings are given to guests or tied around their wrists before a special ceremony or reception is also considered to hold the goodwill of those who offer it.

POINTS ABOUT VEDIC WORSHIP

PURPOSE OF THE DEITY OR IMAGE (MURTI) IN THE TEMPLE

Followers of Sanatana-Dharma believe in the concept of *Atma* (soul) and *Paramatma* (Super Soul). The *Atma* is present in all and is a part of *Paramatma*. It is easier to build a relationship with God if one thinks of Him as a person. The deities are the personal manifestation of one God representing various qualities. The deities are the representation of God that provides the mercy for us to see Him with our material eyes. Generally, until we become more spiritual developed, we cannot see spiritual items with our material mind and senses. So, the deity is the Lord's mercy on us so that we can still see Him in our present materialistic conditioning. The deity, once made under strict rules, is then also installed in the temple in a special ritual in which by various means we call the Lord to inhabit the deity. Then the deity is considered to be no different than the Lord Himself. There are also many stories in which it is related how various deities became alive and acted in ways to reciprocate with the devotion of the devotee. Thus, a deity, though appearing to be made of material ingredients, should in no way be considered material. The Lord can indeed make what is material into something spiritual, or take what is spiritual and make it appear as material. But it is explained that anyone who takes the deity in the temple to be ordinary material substance has a hellish mentality.

In short, the deities are the personal manifestation of gods or goddesses.

WHAT IS PADA PUJA

When a great saintly person or spiritual master arrives for giving *darshan* or to a *satsangh*, sometimes they are given *pada puja*. This is the worship of the feet. Often this is done by giving the feet of that person a bath in flowers, or sometimes with milk. Then the flowers or milk is distributed to the surrounding devotees who then accept it respectfully. By worshiping the feet of one who is grounded in the Ultimate Truth of God consciousness, we are invited to awaken that same consciousness and Supreme Love in our own hearts. Associating with the remnants of such worship of those who are spiritual advanced will accelerate one's own spiritual progress.

THE PURPOSE OF A TEMPLE

A temple is a place where the deities are enshrined and worshiped. In personal expression, a temple is the abode of God. A temple represents an ocean of spiritual energy, which preserves and protects culture and tradition. It magnifies the spiritual vibration which the devotees can then use like a spiritual launching pad from which one can hasten and charge one's own spiritual development by coming closer to the spiritual dimension. Even a temple room in one's own house can work in this way to some extent.

PURPOSE OF VEDIC RITUALS AND RITES

Traditional rites and rituals have a definite influence upon individuals. The activities involved while performing rites and rituals may include a *yajna*, chanting mantras, special offerings, and group participation, which are based upon scientific principles. Scientists acknowledge the influence of sound and music, color, magnetic vibrations, and knowledge on which we concentrate. There is no doubt about the uplifting effect of rites and rituals. Good actions promote good habits and positive impressions that are absorbed by the mind and consciousness. Even psychologists admit that a person picks up good habits quickly when directed by good people in the correct environment.

The conscious mind controls the bulk of everyday activities. The unconscious mind looks after the more subtle and finer activities. The conscious mind collects impressions and influences from the outside world. The Vedic rituals provide a means for this to happen. However, the unconscious mind sorts the information and builds memories. Depending upon the kind of impressions and influences one gathers from the environment, the subconscious mind gradually transforms itself accordingly. A skillful and efficient mind renders the best support and service to the soul. It is not possible to awaken the perception of one's soul without a knowledgeable, controlled and pure mind.

During rites and rituals a priest invokes the blessings of the deities. When individuals experience the kindness of gods and are emotionally touched during the *yajna* and other activities, the mind gets charged with religious feelings. The importance of the occasion, the enthusiasm, the purity of the place, an emotional oath by the individual, the presence of the family, relatives and friends together add up to create a special kind of mental state. Activities during rituals leave an indelible impression upon the individual. This impression specially influences and educates the mind.

The effect of the ceremonies depends upon the atmosphere on the occasion and the way it is conducted. Hindus observe a variety of rites and rituals. The *Gautam Smriti* mentions that there are 40 basic rituals. Some religious texts place this figure at 48. According to Maharishi Angira, there are 25 basic forms of rituals.

THE POTENCY OF CHARANAMRITA

The word *charanamrita* comprises two words, *charan* and *amrita*. *Charan* means *feet* and *amrita* is *the celestial nectar that makes one immortal*. Together the words mean *nectar of God's feet*. This is the water that has been used to bathe the deity of the Lord in the temple. It glides down the body of the deity and through His lotus feet. It is then gathered and sometimes mixed with yogurt and a little sugar and offered to all who come to the temple to see the deities. Thus, having touched the body of the deity form of the Lord, the water becomes spiritually very powerful. Those who come to the temple to see the deities gladly accept three drops in the palm of their right hand, which is supported by their left, and then sip it from their palm.

Charanamrita is normally kept on a special table near the deities in a copper vessel, as copper has many curative qualities. Ayurveda and homoeopathic practitioners have confirmed this. Copper cures spasmodic pains. It is believed that drinking water stored in a copper vessel improves intellect, memory, and wisdom.

The *Padma Purana* says that even if one has not done any pious activities at all, if a person accepts the *charanamrita* of the deity, he becomes eligible to enter Vaikuntha.

In the *Ramayana* (Ayodhya Kand, Doha 101) Tulsidas has said: When Kewat washed the

feet of Sri Rama and accepted the water as *charanamrita*, not only did he attain salvation, but his forefathers also attained it.

In the *Ranvir Bhaktiratanakara Brahma*, it is said: To absolve oneself of sins and get rid of disease God's *charanamrita* is like medicine. If tulasi leaves are added, the qualities are enhanced.

In the *Ranvir Bhaktisagar* it is said: *Charanamrita* protects one from untimely death. It destroys all kinds of diseases. It breaks the chain of death and rebirth.

Charanamrita has great qualities and benefits a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Therefore, always accept *charanamrita* with grace and humility.

WHY THE GANGA (GANGES RIVER) IS CONSIDERED SACRED

In the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva, 85/89-90-93), it is said: Just as fire burns the fuel, in the same way if one were to bathe in the Ganga even after hundreds of forbidden deeds, the water of the Ganga would cleanse them all. In Satya-yuga all pilgrimages produced results. In Treta-yuga Pushkar would be very important, in Dwapara-yuga Kurukshetra, and in Kali-yuga Ganga would be most important. The very name of Ganga purifies a sinner. The sight of it is auspicious. Bathing in it or drinking a few drops purifies seven generations.

In the *Bhagavad-gita*, Sri Krishna also says: Amongst the rivers, I am Ganga. In other religious texts it is said: The medicine for spiritual ills is the water of the Ganga. The doctor who cures these ills is none other than Lord Vishnu.

In the *Padma Purana* it is mentioned that with the influence of the Ganga, the sins of several births are washed away. Much virtue is gained and one finds a place in heaven.

The *Agni Purana* says that the Ganga blesses one with liberation. Those who bathe in it or drink from the Ganga everyday then cross hurdles and sail smoothly in life. Those who chant the glory of the Ganga gain many virtues. There is no pilgrimage on a river holier than the one on the Ganga.

The *Skanda Purana* (Kashi p., 27/49) also says: Just as fire burns on touching it even though one does not want to be burnt, in the same way the Ganga washes away the sins of mankind even when it is not so intended.

Research has confirmed that water from the Ganga does not deteriorate on storage. With its health promoting qualities, Ganga water can be compared to celestial nectar or *amrita*. It is sweet, rich in a variety of minerals and destroys disease. Some people have reported extraordinary cases of revival when Ganga water was given to a dying person. The experience has been described as similar to a fountain of life bursting inside to revive the person. Many people believe that at the time of death a few drops of Ganga water and pieces of tulasi leaf must be administered to a dying person. Therefore, it is important to respect the Ganga River and take all necessary steps to maintain its cleanliness by not pouring pollutants into it and to preserve it as best we can.

WHY THE TULASI TREE IS SACRED

The *Skanda Purana* says that one gets rid of the sins of as many lives as the number of Tulasi plants one grows. The *Padma Purana* asserts that wherever there is a garden of Tulasi plants, that place is like a pilgrimage. Representatives of Yama, the God of Death, cannot enter this home. Homes plastered with soil in which the Tulasi grows are free from disease.

Ancient religious texts have praised the Tulasi plant in many ways. Air that carries the

fragrance of Tulasi benefits people it comes in contact with. Planting and caring for Tulasi helps people get rid of their sins. Even if one Tulasi is grown, the presence of Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, and other gods is assured. Benefits of pilgrimages such as going to Pushkar and that of sacred rivers like the Ganga are also available there. By offering prayers to Tulasi, one automatically prays to all gods and it is akin to a pilgrimage, therefore, the benefits accrue accordingly.

During the month of Kartik (Oct-Nov), when prayers are offered to Tulasi, or new plants are grown, the accumulated sins of many births are absolved. Tulasi affords auspicious opportunities generously. Simultaneously, it removes worries and tension. By offering Tulasi leaves to Lord Krishna one achieves liberation. Without Tulasi, religious ceremonies remain incomplete. When charity is given along with Tulasi, it ensures great benefits. And when *shraddha* is offered to forefathers near a Tulasi plant, it pleases them immensely. At the time of death, it is customary to mix Tulasi with Ganga water and put this in the mouth of the dying person.

It is customary to offer prayers to the Tulasi plant in the evening and light a lamp to offer the Tulasi tree or perform an *arati* to Tulasi. One then attains the blessings of Vrinda and Lord Vishnu. It is believed that the penance of Vrinda and her surrender and devotion to Lord Vishnu became a part of the fragrance and leaves of the Tulasi. It is customary to circumambulate the Tulasi plant 108 times on *Somapati Amavasya* (Monday that coincides with the dark night or new moon of the month) to get rid of insufficiency.

In the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* (Prakriti Khand, 21/40) it is said: Lord Hari is not so pleased after bathing with thousands of pots filled with celestial nectar, as he is when even a single leaf of Tulasi is offered to him.

It is also said that whoever offers even a single Tulasi leaf to Lord Vishnu and prays to him daily attains the benefits of a hundred thousand *Ashwamedha yajnas*. And, at the time of death, even if a single drop of Tulasi water enters the mouth of a dying person, Vishnu Loka (the abode of Lord Vishnu) is attained definitely.

The *Padma Purana* says that whoever bathes with water in which Tulasi is added attains the virtues of having bathed in the Bhagirathi Ganga (Ganges River).

It is also described in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* that her last birth Tulasi was Vrinda Devi, married to an *asura* named Jalandhar. To gain victory over him, Lord Vishnu persuaded Vrinda to give up devotion to her husband. Pleased with her, Vishnu gave her his blessings. Through his blessings she became Tulasi and is worshipped by people all over the world.

[More about Tulasi is explained in my article called, "Tulasi Devi: The Sacred Tree," which will explain this more completely at: www.stephen-knapp.com.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PEEPAL TREE

In *Taittiriya Samhita*, the Peepal tree is included amongst the seven most important trees in the world. The importance of the tree is also attested in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*.

The *Padma Purana* also explains that the Peepal tree is a form of Lord Vishnu. Therefore, it is accorded special importance for religious purposes. Often described as a divine tree, it is an object of prayer. On several occasions around the year prayers are offered to it. It is believed that Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi reside in the Peepal tree on *Somapati Amavasya* (the dark night or new moon of the month that falls on a Monday).

In the *Skanda Purana* (Nagar, 247/41-44), it is explained that: "Vishnu resides in the root

of the Peepal tree. Keshav (another name for Krishna) resides in the trunk, Narayana in the branches, Lord Hari in the leaves and all the gods reside in the fruits. This tree is like the deity of Vishnu. All good people serve the virtues of this tree. This tree is full of all kinds of virtues and has the ability to fulfill desires and absolve the sins of people.” Thus, herein it is described how the different forms of the Supreme Lord are found in this tree, such as Vishnu, Krishna, Narayana, and Hari. And the demigods are in the fruits.

In the *Bhagavad-gita* (10/26), Lord Krishna says: “Amongst trees I am the Asvattha tree.” The Asvattha tree is the holy fig or Peepal tree.

The *Padma Purana* explains that by offering prayers to the Peepal tree and circumambulating it one attains longevity. Whoever offers water to this tree is absolved of all sins and attains heaven.

Many Hindu women believe that by regularly offering prayers and watering the Peepal tree and by circumambulating it, they will be blessed with good children, particularly a son. This is because unknown souls residing in the tree are pleased and enable such blessings to bear fruit. This is why it is customary to tie threads around the trunk or branches of the tree. Putting a little oil in the root of the tree and lighting a lamp near it on Saturdays helps get rid of a variety of problems. To reduce the malefic effect of the seven-and-a-half years of Shani (Saturn) it is customary to offer prayers and circumambulate the Peepal tree. The shadow of Shani resides in the tree.

The bark of the tree is used for religious ceremonies. The leaves are auspicious and used to make buntings on special occasions. Since the tree is hardy, unaffected by disease and pests and because it cleanses the air, it is considered divine. Many times you will find one Peepal tree within the courtyard of a temple. Before sunrise, the influence of poverty hovers over the tree. But after sunrise, Lakshmi takes over. Therefore, prayers to the Peepal tree are forbidden before sunrise. Cutting or destroying a Peepal tree has been equated with the murder of a brahmana.

The Peepal tree converts carbon dioxide into oxygen round the clock. Those who live nearby obtain more oxygen. It is interesting to note that during summer the shade of the tree is cool. During winter there is warmth in the shade. The leaves and the fruits of the tree are used for medicinal purposes.

THE PURPOSE OF THE AGNIHOTRA RITUAL

Agnihotra simply means *a sacrificial fire*. This is the ritual in which ghee and sesame seeds, and on some occasions other items, are offered into a small fire, usually in a pot or special container, while the priest chants various mantras for petitioning the presence and mercy of God. The fire, Agnideva the fire god, becomes the mouth of God, through which He accepts our offerings. These are also distributed to the other demigods, thus, prayers to many divinities may be chanted during the ceremony. The ritual invokes auspiciousness, peace, goodwill, and changes the vibrations and atmosphere wherever it is held.

Amongst Hindus, there is a family name Agnihotri, which is derived from the fact that at one time these families maintained a perpetual fire in their homes. In many homes even today prayers are offered with the fire.

In the Valmiki *Ramayana* (1/6/12), it is said: Everyone performed Agnihotra in Ayodhya everyday. Lord Ram and Sita performed Agnihotra on the day of the coronation. It is also said the aggrieved Kaushalya did not miss out on Agnihotra even on the day Rama left home for 14 years of exile.

In the *Suttinipat* (568/21), Buddha explained the importance of Agnihotra: Just as the ocean amongst the rivers, a king amongst the people, and Savitri amongst the verses, Agnihotra is amongst the *yajnas* (rituals).

In the *Atharva-Veda* (19/55/3) it is also explained: May the fire in the home give us happiness and peace in the morning and evening, a happy temperament, resolve and good health. May it give us fame and honor. May we awaken you through yajna fire so that we may be robust and strong. Agnihotra promotes good health and mental contentment. It is a ladder to spirituality.

In the *Atharva-Veda* (9/2/6) it is said: Agnihotra destroys enemies.

The flames, smoke, and vibrations of the Agnihotra promote mental peace and give contentment. It clarifies the air in the home, spreads fragrance, purifies the atmosphere and thus helps householders. It gives them energy and the power to concentrate. It releases mental tension. Through a cleaner environment it promotes good health for everyone and has innumerable benefits.

The Agnihotra ritual is also called a *yajna*, or Vedic ritual. However, when conducting a *yajna* (pronounced as *yagya*) it is customary to have a *havan* or *fire sacrifice*. The fire is ceremoniously lit, symbolic of inviting Agni, the fire God. Thereafter as mantras are chanted an offering in the form of ghee or *havan samagri* (a mixture of herbs and ghee) is offered to the fire at the end of the mantra. This is also called *ahuti*, which is an *oblation* or *offering* that is put into the fire. While making the offering, the word *Swaha* is uttered loudly.

The *Matsya Purana* says that when the five essential constituents - gods, *havan* fluid or offering (such as ghee), Vedic mantras, the divine law, and a gift to the Brahmin - are there, it is a *yajna* (complete sacrificial ritual). Any good activity done for universal welfare is a *yajna*.

Sages and saints have identified three purposes of a *yajna* - prayer to gods, developing harmonious company, and charity. Prayers to gods are used as models to shape our lives. Harmonious company is having relatives and friends who share similar thoughts and are motivated towards togetherness and mutual support. Charity is to share one's blessings, extend support to society and create a feeling of universal brotherhood.

Through a *yajna* one attains physical, mental and internal peace, purification of the self, spiritual progress, and protection from sickness. The *yajna* fire has five qualities - it is always hot or active; it is exemplary; it is attractive to all that come to it; it is generous because it gives rather than stores its benefits; and the flame is always high, symbolizing concern, character, and self-respect.

In the *Kalika Purana* (23/7/8) it is said: *Yajnas* please the gods. It was through a *yajna* that the entire world was established. *Yajnas* support the whole world. *Yajna* protects people from sin. People live on grain. Grain is produced from clouds that bring rain. Clouds emerge from the *yajnas*. The whole universe depends upon *yajnas*.

In the *Upanishads* it is also explained: Through *yajnas* the gods attained heaven and overcame the demons. Through *yajnas* even enemies become friends. Therefore outstanding people consider a *yajna* a special activity.

In the *Agni Purana* (380/1) it is said: Through a *yajna* the gods grant one's wishes.

In the *Padma Purana* (Shristhi Khand, 3/124), it is said that pleased by a *yajna* the gods bless mankind with well-being.

In the *Manu Samhita* (3/76), it is related that an oblation dutifully offered to the fire is received by Surya.

In the *Sama-Veda* (879) it is said that whoever offers oblations to the fire is blessed with good children, wisdom, wealth and prosperity.

When Brahma created mankind, man visualized that his life would be full of need, problems and sorrow. He complained to Brahma, "Lord! Who would nourish and protect insecure mankind?"

Brahma responded, "Dear son! Through a *yajna* offer oblations to the gods. They will bless you with wealth, prosperity, well-being and fame."

In a *yajna*, after chanting the mantra it is customary to say *Swaha* when making an oblation to the fire. *Swaha* is the name of Agni's wife. It is customary to invoke her name during an offering to make her the medium of the oblation. *Swaha* literally means *good speech*.

HINDUS AND VEDIC FOLLOWERS DO NOT PRACTICE ANIMAL SACRIFICE

Sometimes people who are confused or misinformed think that Hindus or followers of Vedic culture practice the sacrifice of animals to the deities or in rituals. However, this is completely wrong, even though some people who are misinformed or misguided, nonetheless, feel animal sacrifice is necessary.

In the *Mahabharata* (Shanti Parva), it is said: Knaves and rascals initiated the offering of liquor, fish, animals, and human sacrifice in a *yajna*. They had a demonical temperament and desired to eat meat in a *yajna*. In the *Vedas* eating of flesh has not been recommended.

To please Bhairav, Bhawani and other gods and goddesses, some Hindus who were greedy for meat began offering animal sacrifices. During Mughal rule, meat eating became popular. It is said that some greedy priests wrote certain *shlokas* (verses) that claimed the goddess desired animal sacrifice, and the flesh would be served as *prasada*, the mercy of the deity. These *shlokas* were mischievously included in some religious texts. All Vedic religious texts forbid the eating of meat and consider it food for demons. No authentic religious text permits meat eating, unless it has been foolishly tampered with. If gods and goddesses were greedy for meat, they would motivate one into savage acts rather than towards compassion. Would they then have been different from demons? Killing innocent animals in the name of religion and offering them to gods and goddesses to fulfill selfish desires cannot be justified in any way. With such sinful acts one cannot expect to be blessed with prosperity, good fortune or happiness. Such sacrifices do not please any god or goddess. If one does find happiness sometimes, it is temporary. Bad deeds only ensure sorrow and hell.

In the *Shrimad-Bhagavatam*, Vedavyas says that whoever offers animal sacrifice and prays to demons and evil spirits will be worse than animals. Hell is certain. In the end, such people roam about in the utter darkness of ignorance and sorrow. It also explains that those animal sacrifices meant for Kali are not accepted by Kali, but she lets her ghostly assistants partake of such offerings. Thus, anything taken as remnants or *prasada* from such offerings are but remnants from those ghostly beings and not Kali or any demigoddess.

It is also sometimes suggested that the *Vedas* explain that there should be *ajbali* in the *yajnas* or sacrificial rituals. *Aj* is interpreted to mean a *goat* and *bali* means sacrifice. But the correct interpretation is that a seed is also known as *aj*. *Aj* denotes cereals. Therefore, the *Vedas* direct us to use cereals. Killing of animals is forbidden in a *yajna* and is irreligious. This is why ghee and sesame and grains are used in offerings of any authentic Vedic ritual. However, in the temples of Lord Krishna, wonderful vegetable preparations, cooked with devotion in a sacred environment, and are offered to the deity and then distributed as *prasada*.

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST

THE FOUR STAGES OF LIFE

An important belief of Hindus/Vedic followers is that there are four stages, or *ashrams*, of life every individual passes through. The first stage of life is called the **Brahmacharya ashram**. This period is rounded out to the first 25 years of life. It is considered to be a period of student life in which one remains celibate for acquiring the focused and determined state of mind for spiritual and academic advancement. During Vedic times, this would be the stage when the student would attend the *gurukula*, or the school or ashrama of the guru, and study under him for spiritual and material knowledge.

The second stage of the life is termed the **Grihastha ashram**, in which young men and women marry and raise a family. This is the householder's life and perhaps the most difficult stage when a person needs to interact with a variety of people and situations, and attend to the attentions of career and supporting a family.

The third stage is termed the **Vanaprastha ashram**, which generally starts sometime around the age of 50 years old. At this stage it is expected that one's children have grown up and found a place in society. Daughters would be married and sons will have entered into a career and be well on their way to their own *Grihastha ashram*.

At this stage, while children are gradually detaching themselves from parents, it is expected that parents too will slowly detach themselves from the householder's responsibilities and spend time in preparing for a new life focused increasingly on spiritual advancement and one's approaching old age and death. Life is a preparation for all of these events, and the Vanaprastha ashrama is when one especially begins to concentrate on the final years and prepare for the next life.

The fourth stage of life is termed the **Sannyasa ashram**. This stage is primarily for men and extends from around the 75th year of one's life until the final emancipation. If the third stage aims at detachment from worldly life, this stage aims at renunciation, asceticism, and abandonment of worldly ties or mundane interests. At this stage, if one is at peace with oneself, he/she makes the final effort to find ultimate freedom from any further bondage to the cycles of birth and death.

Of course, a person's life may not follow these stages exactly as described. They may change according to circumstances, and in the way a person may or may not make progress on the spiritual path.

THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL INITIATION, OR DIKSHA

Spiritual initiation from a guru is also considered an important part of the Vedic lifestyle. This is usually done during the Brahmacharya stage of life while one is still a student. However, such an initiation by a guru that inspires you with his spiritual knowledge can be done at any time of life. The decision to become initiated is usually made only after one has spent time observing the qualities of a particular guru and has decided that he is the appropriate spiritual teacher and guide that a person needs in their life.

However, this is not a one-way decision. The guru must also observe the student or potential disciple over a period of time to see if the student is also qualified by interest, determination, and sincerity to follow the guru's instructions. If the guru is approached by

someone who wants initiation who has these qualities, and the student is similarly ready for initiation, or *diksha*, then the relationship between the guru and disciple can proceed accordingly. The initiation ceremony is only the formality of recognizing this exchange between the guru and disciple, which is a lifetime relationship. During the *diksha* ceremony, the guru also gives the disciple the appropriate mantra that the student uses for his accelerated spiritual development. By chanting the mantra given to the student, he or she awakens his hidden potential and powers.

The ceremony also represents the guru taking away the student's or disciple's blockages, such as any bad karma that may stifle the disciple's progress. This is an extremely important and difficult responsibility and should not be taken lightly by the disciple.

The real relationship between the guru and disciple is the disciple's rendering of service in exchange for the spiritual knowledge and guidance given by the guru. The disciple may offer service or offerings in the form of time, activity, intellectual work, supplies and facility, or financial funds to assist the guru in his work and upkeep. The guru then gives spiritual knowledge and direction that has been attained through his own study, research, practice, and personal experience. The guru also provides the necessary step-by-step instructions so the disciple can properly understand and utilize the scriptural instructions as found in the Vedic texts in one's life.

Diksha can be in several forms. When the guru gives a verbal mantra to the student, it is known as *mantric diksha*. When the *diksha* is given through a signal or gesture, it is called *shambhvi diksha*, and when it is given by touching a certain part of the disciple's body to arouse the kundalini or the energy within, it is known as *sparsh diksha*.

After the disciple receives initiation or *diksha* from the guru or spiritual master, it is only appropriate that he makes a token payment for it in the form of *dakshina* or an honorarium. By giving the honorarium the student affirms his faith and devotion to the teacher. The honorarium is also important because anything free is never taken as seriously as that for which one pays in some form.

WHERE CHARITY FITS INTO THE VEDIC SYSTEM

It is the responsibility of everyone to give charity. One should give charity as a duty towards society and expect nothing in return. It is very noble to feed a hungry person. However, imparting knowledge is even better. Feeding a person is momentary support. Imparting knowledge is permanent support.

In the *Rig-Veda* it is said that of all charities imparting knowledge is best. It cannot be stolen or destroyed. With time it grows and continues giving happiness to many people. Hindu religious texts suggest that charity in different forms must be given on festivals and special occasions. This charity must be given happily with love and devotion. One should leave the fruit thereof to God. He responds with great happiness and contentment.

In the *Bhavishya Purana* (151/18) it is said that three kinds of charity are particularly meritorious - the giving of a cow, the giving of land, and the giving of knowledge. It is believed that the benefits continue for seven generations.

The *Manu Samhita* (4/229-234) also explains some interesting benefits of giving charity. It is said that whoever feeds a hungry person finds great satisfaction. One who gives sesame seeds in charity is blessed with cherished progeny. One who gives a lamp or some form of light in charity is blessed with good eyesight. One who donates land receives land in return. Whoever donates gold is blessed with long life. Those who donate silver are blessed with beauty and

charm. Of all charities, the best is teaching of the *Vedas*.

When a donor gives charity with love and devotion, and the benefactor receives it with the same sentiments, both the donor and benefactor go to heaven. When there is disrespect in giving or receiving, both go to hell. With whatever sentiments one gives charity, it returns in the same way.

In the *Skanda Purana* (Maheshwar Khand), it is said: No virtue accrues from charity that is given out of ill-gotten wealth. In giving charity out of duty it is important that one must adhere to morality and ethics.

THE REASONS FOR DOING PILGRIMAGES

The whole point of pilgrimages is to visit the holy places, associate with other pilgrims and *sadhus* and sages to gain spiritual knowledge, and become enlivened by the energy of such highly evolved souls and the historical occurrences involving various Vedic divinities that happened at such places. So for this reason, people who are serious about spiritual life go to such locations as Badrinatha, Dwaraka, Jagannatha Puri, Rameswaram, as well as Rishikesh, Haridwar, Kanchipuram, Mathura, or visit holy rivers such as the Ganga, Yamuna, etc. Each of these places has special features and significance which makes them beneficial for any pilgrim to visit. Then when they return home, they are spiritually surcharged and can share that energy with others, as well as cope with everyday life better than before. Visiting such places, engaging in the austerity or struggle and expense to reach such locations brings one spiritual merit and freedom from so much negative karma.

In ancient times, such pilgrimages would be done on foot. Now we take trains, buses or cars, and the holy places have more modern amenities and are even more commercialized than before. So now more pilgrims go to these places. But the purpose remains the same, as long as we don't forget it, which is to learn how to better cross over the great ocean of material existence.

Many of the *Puranas* have chapters that describe the benefits of visiting various holy towns, villages, or temples. Thus, the historical meaning and significance of such places go back thousands of years.

Large parts of the *Shiva Purana*, *Padma Purana*, and *Skanda Purana* are devoted to the benefits of pilgrimages. Even the *Vedas*, *Upa Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* contain portions which say that by going on pilgrimage one gets rid of sins, accumulates virtues, finds favor with the gods and goddesses, achieves inner peace, finds fulfillment in everyday life and steps towards heaven.

In the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva) it is said that through a pilgrimage one can conveniently attain the benefits that cannot be easily attained even through the special *Agnistome yajna*. However, those who travel for fun or sightseeing and are devoid of the devotion required for a pilgrimage cannot attain these benefits. A pilgrimage should have two objectives -- the cleansing of the mind and welfare of the self/soul. Those who travel with these objectives will benefit from a pilgrimage.

In the *Mahabharata* (Vana Parva, 85/92) it is said: Going on the holy pilgrimages to Pushkar, Kurukshetra, Ganga, and Magadha benefits seven generations each of forefathers and successors. In the *Devi Bhagawat* it is said that just as the purpose of agriculture is to produce grain, the purpose of a pilgrimage is to become sinless. In the *Atharva-Veda* (18/4/7) it is said that pilgrims get over sins and shortcomings through pilgrimages and advance towards a pure

wholesome life. It is also said the benefits that accrue from a pilgrimage are in direct proportion to the devotion of the pilgrim.

The *Bhavishya Purana* (Uttara Kand, 122/7-8) explains: When the hands, the legs, the mind and the speech are in balance, and the person is knowledgeable, reputed and devoted, one benefits from a pilgrimage. One who is not devoted, is a sinner, is suspicious, an unbeliever or a sophist - these five kinds of people never benefit from a pilgrimage.

The *Skanda Purana* goes on to explain that speaking the truth is a pilgrimage. Forgiveness is a pilgrimage that bears fruit. Control over the senses is as beneficial as a pilgrimage. Kindness to all people is as virtuous as a pilgrimage. A simple life too is like a pilgrimage. Amongst all pilgrimages the most outstanding one is the purification of the mind.

The *Padma Purana* also relates that during pilgrimages one comes across saints and ascetics and those that are specially blessed by God. Meeting them can help destroy sins just as if one would burn them with fire.

WHY HINDUS CREMATE THEIR DEAD

Whoever is born must die. Amongst Hindus it is customary to do the last rites by consigning the body to fire. On this occasion, all relatives, friends and acquaintances get together to mentally convey a farewell to the departed soul. Their presence on this occasion reminds everyone of the ultimate truth -- everyone has to die some day. It also reminds them of the futility of living only for oneself or without spiritual development.

In the *Chudaman Upanishad* it is said that Brahma gave birth only to the flame-like soul. From the soul, the sky was born. From the sky, air was born, from air fire, from fire water, and from water the earth was born. These five elements united to form the human body. When a dead body is cremated in fire, the elements return to nature from where they came initially.

In the *Atharva-Veda* (18/2/56), the cremation of a dead body is explained thus: O Departed Soul, your lifeless body is offered so that the two fires may unite for your salvation. I set the body on fire. Through these two fires you may go in your best state to Yama (the lord of death), who controls death.

The *Atharva-Veda* (18/3/71) also says: O Fire. Accept this dead body. Give it refuge. May your acceptance of the body bring you glory. O God in the garb of fire, burn this body and deliver the person to the abode of righteousness.

The *Yajur-Veda* (40/15) also relates: "O industrious person! At the time of leaving the body, chant the principal and outstanding name of God, Om. Remember God. Remember your past deeds. The air that goes in and out of the body is like celestial nectar. However, the end of the physical body is ash. It will end as ash. The dead body is worthy of being turned to ash."

There is the understanding amongst Hindus that after death the soul continues to hover around the dead body due to its earlier attachment with it. When the body is consigned to the flames and burnt to ashes the relationship between the soul and the body ends. Therefore, to help speed the soul along to its next existence, the body is burned to ashes.

It is customary amongst Hindus that the son of the deceased performs the cremation ceremony. This is to prepare the son to accept that his father or mother is dead. It also prepares him emotionally to take over the responsibilities of the household and also fulfill his duties towards society.

During the cremation ceremony when the dead body is set on fire, an important part of the ceremony is *kapal kriya*. The significance of this is explained in the *Gamda Purana*. During

kapal kriya, the skull is broken with a bamboo pole because it consists of very hard bone that cannot be burnt easily, even by fire. When broken, it burns with the rest of the body and is converted to the five elements that constitute the body and becomes a part of the ashes.

THE PURPOSE OF IMMERSING THE ASHES OF THE DEAD INTO SACRED RIVERS

If you go to many of the holy places around India, such as Gaya, Haridwar, Pushkar, Ujjain, Varanasi, and other places, you will see that Hindus who have had a death in the family do a particular ritual wherein they offer the ashes of the dead to the sacred rivers, such as the Ganga, Yamuna, Sipra, etc. There is much meaning and purpose behind this practice.

The remnant of the dead body after burning is left behind in the form of ashes. Hindus respectfully call these ashes *phool* - literally *flowers* - to express devotion and respect for the departed soul. When children are symbolically referred to as 'fruit', it is appropriate to refer to the ashes of forefathers as 'flowers'.

It is customary to gather or take the ashes on the fourth day after death. They are then immersed in sacred rivers like the Ganga. If it is not possible to immerse them immediately, they are kept in a locker in the crematorium or at home and immersed as soon as possible. This should be done no later than a year after the death of the person.

The *Shankha Smriti* (page 7) explains the consigning of ashes to the Ganga as follows: As long as the ashes of the deceased person remain in the Ganga, the person continues to enjoy happiness in worthy places for thousands of years (in the next existence).

Furthermore, in the *Kurma Purana* (35/31-34) it is said: Whatever number of years the ashes remain in the Ganga, the departed soul is held in reverence in heaven for thousand times the number. Of all the pilgrimages and of all the rivers, Ganga is considered most holy. It grants liberation to all, including those that have committed gross sins. Although accessible everywhere to the common man, Ganga is unique at Haridwar, Prayag, and Gangasagar. Those who desire liberation, including emotionally downtrodden sinners, there is no better place than the Ganga. Religious writers also understand that the deceased person's journey towards the eternal home (the spiritual realm beyond heaven and hell) does not start until the ashes are consigned to the Ganga.

THE MEANING OF THE PINDA (*PIND DAAN*) CEREMONY

The custom of *pind daan* dates back to the time when the *Vedas* were written. The *pinda daan* is performed after the death of a person. The word *pind* means *a body*. The word *daan* denotes *charity* or *giving*. Therefore, *pind daan* means *giving charity to the body of the deceased*. This means that if the deceased is in a distressed or hellish condition, and in a place where they are paying for their sinful activities and may be thirsty or hungry, the *pind daan* ceremony helps to alleviate the distress of the deceased. Depending upon circumstances, the son or another person performs *pind daan*.

When a person dies, the soul leaves the body. To end the relationship between the soul and the body, the body is consigned to flames where it is converted into ashes. These ashes are consigned to a holy river like the Ganga. Thereby, nothing remains of the physical body, but the soul waits for a new body. It is said that it may take ten days for the deceased to enter a new situation. On the 11th and 12th day the food is offered to the deceased through the *shraddha* ceremony to be eaten. It is believed that on the 13th day the messengers of death usher the

deceased into Yamaloka, the abode of Yama. When the last rites are performed with devotion, the deceased enters Yamaloka happily, after which he may be given a pleasant or uplifting situation. To Hindus this is important. Therefore, the food (*pind daan*) that is offered is accepted by the deceased through the scent of smell, not that it is actually or physically eaten. The scent of smell and sound, and the transfer of emotions can still be felt by the deceased from those who remain on the physical plane. Thus, the *pind daan* and the *shraddha* ceremony are utilized to serve this purpose.

It is explained in the *Yoga Vashista*, (3/55/27): At this stage the soul is aware that the old body is dead and that it is through the *pind daan* of the son or brethren that a new body has been created and relieved of any distress. This experience is conveyed through feelings and sentiments. The physical rites are only symbolic. These sentiments embrace the deceased.

On receiving *pind daan* the soul or deceased feels happy and content, and after giving blessings proceeds to Yamaloka in an improved situation. A son who does not offer *pind daan* to the deceased can be cursed in retaliation.

It is believed that it was Brahma who first performed the *pind daan* ceremony in Gaya. Since then this tradition has continued. Offering *pind daan* during the dark fortnight of Ashvin is of special significance. Symbolically, a *pind* is a round ball made of a mixture of wheat and rice flour with some sesame seeds mixed along with some milk and honey. Seven balls are made out of 100 grams of flour. Of these, one is offered to the deceased and the rest to others as desired.

In the *Vayu Purana*, according to a narration titled *Gaya Mahatam*, when creating mankind, Brahma created a demon named Gayasur. The demon went atop the Kolahal Mountain and offered great penance to Vishnu. Pleased with Gayasur, Vishnu asked him to seek one blessing. So, Gayasur requested that whoever came in touch with him -- be it an angel or a demon, an insect, a sinner, a saint or a sage, or an evil spirit -- should find liberation after having been purified of all sins. From that day everyone who came in touch with him found liberation and proceeded to Vaikuntha (abode of Vishnu).

The *Kurma Purana* (34/7-8) also explains: All forefathers appreciate a pilgrimage to Gaya by their successors. Once the *pind daan* is performed in Gaya, one achieves liberation. One becomes free of rebirth. If one visits Gaya even once and offers *pind daan* to the forefathers, they become free from hell and other dreadful destinations and achieve salvation.

The *Kurma Purana* also explains that whoever goes to Gaya for *pind daan* is blessed and seven generations from the paternal and maternal side are benefited along with the personal self who achieves liberation.

Only a son or another male relative is authorized to offer *pind daan*. However, in 1985, the Brahmins of Mithila authorized women relatives also to offer *pind daan*. It is said that once Sita too offered *pind daan* after the death of Dasaratha, Lord Rama's father and Her father-in-law.

This story is that when Rama, Lakshman and Sita reached the banks of the Phalgu River in Gaya to offer *pind daan*. Rama and Lakshman left Sita there so that they could collect the necessary items for *pind daan*. When they were away, there was a celestial call saying that the auspicious time for *pind daan* was passing away, and that Sita should proceed with *pind daan*.

Considering the situation, Sita proceeded to do *pind daan* with cows, Phalgu River, Ketaki flowers, and fire as witnesses. She personally chanted mantras offering balls made of river sand to Dasaratha. When Rama and Lakshman returned, Sita told them about what had happened. Rama and Lakshman found it hard to believe. When Sita asked witnesses to testify about what

she had said, none besides the Vat tree did so.

Sita was enraged. She cursed the cows that they would eat impure things. She cursed the river Phalgu that it would be dry on the top and water would flow beneath the waterline. She cursed the Ketaki flower that it would never be used for auspicious occasions. She cursed the fire that whatever came in contact with it would be destroyed. Yet, She blessed the Vat tree that it would remain evergreen. And now we can see that the Phalgu River dries up almost completely during the winter or dry season, and only flows easily in the rainy season. And in this age of Kali-yuga, we can see in India that wandering cows eat whatever they can in order to survive, even refuse and plastic. And certainly fire burns anything that comes in touch with it. These are some of the ways Sita's curse can be recognized.

THE PURPOSE OF THE SHRADDHA CEREMONY

Thirteen days after death it is customary to feed brahmanas, saints, sages, and other devotees in the fond memory of the deceased. This ceremony is called *shraddha*. It is believed that when brahmanas and others are offered food in memory of the deceased, one's devotion for the deceased remains steadfast. When the ceremony is performed as a gesture of gratitude to the deceased, it brings with it great inner peace and goodwill. It is understood that this makes the deceased happy and content in whatever their situation may be. It is an important step towards the salvation of the deceased. It is also customary to perform the *shraddha* ceremony on the death anniversary of the deceased.

In the *Manu Samhita* (3/275) it is written: Whatever one offers ceremoniously and with devotion to the deceased reaches them in heaven in an imperishable and eternal form.

In the *Brahma Purana* it is said that in the dark fortnight of Ashvin (Sep-Oct), Yama frees all souls so that they can visit their children to accept the food they offer at the *shraddha* ceremony. It is also accepted that those who do not offer food to their forefathers during this period may attract their wrath and may have to suffer if cursed by them. Coming generations may also suffer on account of this lapse.

In the *Garuda Purana* it is explained: When *shraddha* is performed to their satisfaction, the deceased bless their successors with age, a son, fame, salvation, heaven, glory, stability, strength, prosperity, cattle, happiness, money, growth, and eternal blessings.

The *Yama Smriti* (36-37) further explains that a father, grandfather, and great grandfather desire the *shraddha* ceremony just as birds living on trees desire that the tree bear fruit. They expect that successors will offer honey, milk, and *kheer* (rice-porridge) at the *shraddha* ceremony.

The *Yama Smriti* (40) also says: Whatever number of morsels a brahmana, expert in mantras, eats, that many morsels are accepted by the father of the person performing *shraddha* by being present within the body of the brahmana or devotee.

In the *Atharva-Veda*, (18/3/42), another way of reaching food to the forefathers is explained. It says that while offering oblation to the fire, the person performing *shraddha* should pray as follows: O admirable God of Fire! You know how and in whatever form or place my father resides. Whatever foods we present as an offering please reach it to him with your beneficence.

In the *Vishnu Purana* it is written that when *shraddha* is performed with devotion, it not only gives contentment to the forefathers, but also to Brahma, Indra, Rudra, Ashwini Kumar, Surya, Agni, Ashtvasu, Vayu, Rishi, mankind, birds, animals, reptiles, and also the spirits.

In the *Brahma Purana* it is said that the family of the person who performs *shraddha* with devotion will be trouble free.

According to Maharishi Sumantu, in this world there is no other path to good fortune than performing *shraddha*. All wise people must devotedly perform *shraddha*.

In the *Markandeya Purana* it is said that the nation and family where *shraddha* is not performed will never have brave and healthy men who live a hundred years.

In the *Mahabharata*, Vidura tells Dhritarashtra that whoever does not perform *shraddha* is termed foolish by wise people.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TARPAN FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE DECEASED

Tarpon literally means *offering of water to the deceased*. This is often included in and is a part of the *shraddha* ceremony. It is customary to add milk, oats, rice, sesame seeds, sandalwood and flowers when offering *tarpan*. The mixture is offered in a small stream made with the use of *kusha* grass and offered while chanting particular Vedic mantras. Of course, it is usually the priest who directs the ceremony and the mantras to chant so you can do it properly. When this offering is made with devotion, gratitude, goodwill, love, and good wishes, it immediately ensures contentment for the deceased. This offering is made on the death anniversary of the deceased. If one does not know the date of the death, then the ceremony can be performed during the dark fortnight of Ashvin (Sep-Oct).

In the *Manu-samhita*, *tarpan* has been described as *pitra-yajna* - a *yajna* dedicated to the memory of forefathers. It is believed that it gives contentment to the deceased, and promotes comfort and happiness for their successors. The ceremony is meant to remember the deceased, offer reverence and appease the hunger for remembrance. Forefathers look forward to this by their successors.

Among *shraddha* ceremonies, six kinds of *tarpan* are commended. Each has its own significance.

Devatarpan aims at making an offering to water, air, Surya, Agni, Moon, energy, and the gods that work selflessly for the welfare of mankind.

Rishitarpan aims at making an offering to Narada, Charaka, Vyasa, Ddhichi, Sushrut, Vashistha, Yagavalkya, Vishwamitra, Atri, Katyayan, Panini, and other rishis.

Divyamanavtarpan aims at making an offering to all who have made sacrifices for the welfare of mankind such as the Pandavas, Maharana Pratap, Raja Harishchandra, Janak, Shivi, Shivaji, Bhamashah, Gokhale, Tilak, and other important people.

Divyapitratarpan aims at making an offering to those forefathers who left behind great moral values and wealth for successors.

Yamatarpan aims at making an offering to remember the god of Death, Yamaraja, and to accept the principle of birth and death.

Manushyapitratarpan aims at making an offering to all those who are related to the family as relatives, teachers, friends, and others.

In this way, through *tarpan* an individual makes offerings of goodwill for everything connected with the person. It ensures happiness and contentment.

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So herein are a few additional points regarding the basic Vedic view of customs and

traditions in the practice of Vedic culture. To understand these points can be beneficial for anyone who wants to know why certain things are done. I hope that this can be used to spread the understanding of these particular practices, and awaken the reasons for the customs that have been followed for thousands of years.

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